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InHouse Theatre's Dinner with Friends

Charity Hume · Thursday, October 20th, 2016

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The breathtaking catharsis of a well executed play occurs when all its elements, its structure, its cast, its set, its internal music of emotional truth, correspond to give the audience an experience of singular insight, one that will give them the sense that they too have been altered and changed by the night's events. InHouse Theatre's skilled rendition of Donald Margulies's Pulitzer winning masterpiece, *Dinner With Friends,* takes us on emotional journey that questions our relationships and our assumptions about the people we most intimately know. The InHouse cast, a powerful ensemble of premier actors, delivers an entertaining but thought provoking interpretation of the play in its confident production of this modern classic.

In keeping with the philosophy of InHouse, audiences are invited to on-site locations that immerse the audience in the world of the play. Typically, InHouse stages its work in site-specific locations that dissolve the fourth wall as the plays are set in bars, studios, houses, and bedrooms, rather than on a curtained stage. (How passé!) For *Dinner With Friends*, InHouse artfully staged the work at the historic Moncado Mansion in the West Adams neighborhood, and the architectural layout of the house added a layer of meaning to the drama. Drew Rausch's sensitive direction makes skillful use of the space, as we begin the play on the lower floors, and gradually ascend as its ideas become more complex, and ultimately, higher in nature. The audience's path through the house opens to new spaces as insight deepens, and the emotional progress of the characters results in a collective expansion of the "mansion of the mind." But the intriguing choice of venue succeeds so powerfully because of superbly realistic and nuanced performances by Caroline Morahan, (Karen), Dylan Ramsey, (Gabe), Renee Threatte, (Beth) and Tim Redmond, (Tom). They immerse us in their domestic world in an exquisitely challenging, intimate portrayal of the world's worst weekend in a couple's life.

Those who have lived through the hard conversations that lead to divorce will recognize the archetypal, familiar and tragic truths behind Marguilies's dialogue. In witnessing the sensitive portrayal of Caroline Morahan's Karen and Dylan Ramsey's Gabe as they process their best friends' divorce, one feels the separations cut to the core, as their chemistry conveyed a subtle mockery of our own superficial preoccupation with our life style/Facebook competitions with the realities of what it means to be faithful and married when the adventure of love begins to fade. In their opening scenes, I was reminded of the night my own "Ex" and I went to our best friends' house and let them know we were going to divorce. That day remains with me as one of the saddest moments of the marriage, the day we were still together, but the hours were running out. That final excursion of walking over to tell a happily married couple that we were splitting up was one of the very last things we did together. In *Dinner with Friends,* Tim Redmond, Tom, brilliantly

shows the uneven competition he feels when he is late to this confession, as he challenges Beth's motives in "spilling" the beans while he is not present. Contesting her motives, he confronts Beth with the real consequence that she has the upper hand in the fallout. The classic questions to the aftermath of their divorce pertain: who will be friends with whom? Who will "get" Karen and Gabe? We are immediately involved in a duel over their lasting loyalties, splitting hairs, siding with first one, then the other.

In a Pinter type flashback in an ensuing scene, we glimpse the couples ten years earlier, the weekend Beth and Tom first met, "set up" by the newly married Karen and Gabe. As the scene fills us in on the complicated dynamics of their shared past, this time we have 20/20 hindsight, and we are on alert for the signs of the end we now know the future will hold. In their first date, we find the seeds of the conflict rooted in their past. Tim Redmond's Tom exudes a sadly familiar narcissism, in an abusive interrogation that the wounded Beth finds masochistically appealing. Both seem imprisoned by their own insecurities, and we recognize in their fears our own need to have a place or identity in life, a title, a meaning, along with the tendency to take out our frustrations on those closest to us. The binding together of these two lost souls in a single union begins to seem random and meaningless, as we see their unhappiness with one another point toward the fact that their separation is for the best. Renee Threatte and Tim Redmond lend authenticity and power as the foil couple to their own chosen idols of the "normal" and successful bourgeois paradigm of happily married Karen and Gabe. They capture an intimate but violent dynamic that reveals an abusive eroticism between them. We gradually realize that no matter how attracted they may have been, or may still be to one another, they bring out the worst in each other. You want them to split.

As the play hastens towards its climax, the audience is properly in the dark. What is the play ultimately about? Is this play a sordid understanding that our marriages are either dishonest or narcissistically competitive? Are the powerful attractions of early love just unrealistic delusions that intimacy and loyalty can have a permanent place in a modern marriage? We examine these questions with the characters, as each scene delves deeper into the truth of the relationships beneath the veneer of social interactions, dinners, risotto tips and wine pairings, trips to Europe and endless soccer games. The characters seek to identify the crucial wrong turn earlier in the relationship that could hold a key to the present, as if it could be rewritten, as if the unraveling of their worlds can be changed. But these attempts seem futile, when we learn that as Beth and Tom will begin over again with new partners, their earlier bonds with their "best friends" shift out from under them, revealing the truth of their competition and alienation, until the loyalties between friends, in addition to the marriages, seem to be running on empty.

The most moving moment of the play comes as Karen and Gabe prepare for bed, faucets running in the bathroom as they brush teeth and then confide the day's events once they settle under the covers. Gabe tries to answer Beth's question as to what happens to the adventure, the early romantic love, and he tries to piece it together for her, knowing that as he answers her with honesty, he and she are admitting that they are older now, and so much of that first blush of attraction has in fact faded from their lives. He answers: "You know: having kids . . . having to pay the mortgage . . . making the deadline . . . *marinating the snapper*." In this beautifully acted *pas de deux*, Dylan Ramsey and Caroline Morahan lead us to an intimate resolution that anyone who has experienced a committed love will find joyous and erotic in its earned intimacy. For all its harsh realities, their powerful grasp of this marriage moment, when two people hold one another hard in the face of the threats to emotional security we have all experienced, creates an affirming scene, and as such, makes *Dinner With Friends*, what I would call, a real romance.

Tim Redmond, Dylan Ramsey, Renee Threatte, and Caroline Morahan in Dinner With Friends,

Photo by Joshua Fike

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