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Theater review: ACT's 'Rich and Famous' loaded with laughs

By Pat Craig
CONTRA COSTA TIMES
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"Rich and Famous," John Guare's comedy with music gets a stylish, snazzy revival by American Conservatory Theatre Company with a cast of four that manages to capture the wickedly cutting and just plain goofy humor that makes the piece such a delight.

With his rewritten version of this 1976 script, Guare moves theater of the absurd into whoopee cushion territory, but without working particularly hard to score laughs. Much of the credit for this must also go to director John Rando and the devilishly clever cast of Brooks Ashmanskas, Mary Bridsong, Stephen DeRosa, and ACT core company member Gregory Wallace, all of whom are playing at the top of their comedy game.

The play remains firmly set in the '70s — from the platform shoes to the big butterfly bow ties from costume designer Gregory Gale — as it unfolds the saga of Bing Ringling (Ashmanskas), a struggling young playwright who, on his 844th try, gets his shot at off-Broadway fame.

His brush with the big time is celebrated by his girlfriend Leanara (Bridsong), who gives him cuff links, one marked R (for rich) and one marked F (for famous). She also hints broadly that one of her fondest fantasies is getting a proposal from a promising young playwright on the opening night of his first triumph.

But Ringling's play isn't doomed, due in part to one of its stars, Aphro (Wallace) who flubs the few lines he manages to remember.

To make matters worse, Ringling's childhood

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chum Tybalt Dunleavy (DeRosa) is in the audience, and sends the playwright a note saying he wants to put his red-hot Hollywood career on hold to be in Ringling's new play. So immediately Ringling sees a way to jettison Aphro and move up to Broadway by having a big name in the cast. Unfortunately, the show has closed before either of these things can happen.

And meanwhile, producer Veronica Gulpp-Vestige (Bridsong again) tells Ringling the reason she decided to produce his play was because she wanted to taste failure for the first time in her career. She promises that eventually, years and many more failures from now, Ringling will be able to stage a comeback and get the triumph he so desires.

Not surprisingly, he is devastated by the news, and the remainder of the show is spent finding new ways to humiliate and emasculate poor Ringling. To everyone else, the unfolding action is hilarious. For

Ringling, it's one emotional trauma after another, allowing Ashmanskas to revel in a wonderful comic performance.

But the other three actors seem to have even more fun — each plays at least two widely diverse characters and gets a chance to create a number of different and wonderfully memorable personnas.

The show unfolds at a frenetic place, and with the rapid-fire dialog of a Mel Brooks' comedy, and Guare wins his spurs as a champion of the show business zany comedy.

Reach Pat Craig at pcraig@bayareanewsgroup.com

THEATER REVIEW

- **WHAT:** "Rich and Famous," by John Guare
- **WHERE:** American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco
- **WHEN:** 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays through Feb. 8

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