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## Theater Review: Now, that's 'Rich': A nightmare of ambition is madcap at ACT

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What if you were about to get everything you thought you ever wanted, but somehow it all went wrong?

You might think you were in a paranoid bad dream, which is how John Guare's "Rich and Famous" feels. Only Guare's version has terrific jokes and bright songs carrying a cautionary fable of artistic ambition.

The new American Conservatory Theater production of Guare's freshly revised 1974 satire adds a galvanizing lead performance from Brooks Ashmanskas to carry the play's broad swath through a few rough patches to a satisfying conclusion.

Ashmanskas plays struggling playwright Bing Ringling, who's about to get his first Off Broadway production. Actually, Bing is getting his first production of any kind after writing 843 plays. His latest, "Etruscan Conundrum," is having its opening night, and Bing might be on the verge of breaking through to the life he's always dreamed of. But then again, Bing's ambition could get turned upside down and his dream spun into a nightmare featuring one reversal after another.

Which of course is what happens to Bing, who spends opening night flitting from disaster to disaster. The play stars his fairly inept actress girlfriend Leanara (Mary Birdsong, who convincingly appears as several characters) and the bumbling Aphro (Gregory Wallace). Aphro brings Bing a note backstage from Bing's childhood friend Tybalt Dunleavy (the outstanding Stephen DeRosa), who is in the audience. Dunleavy, now a movie star, wants to appear in Bing's play.

Before Bing can contact Dunleavy, though, producer Veronica Gulp-Vestige (Birdsong) tells Bing the only reason she's involved with the play is because she thinks it will flop. Then she can have what she's never had – a comeback. Bing then sets out on a series of picaresque comic adventures, each taking him down a different road of success hell.

Director John Rando's brisk, uncluttered take on New York in the 1970s allows Scott Bradley's over-the-top sets to create a lurid, hysterical world. Ashmanskas gives Bing a soft but appealing Everyman quality as he steps into this world with his naive, oversized ambition. Some of Guare's scenes linger tiredly past their points, and then the relentless energy of Ashmanskas and his castmates pushes the production forward.

When Guare wrote "Rich and Famous," he had already achieved heady success with his play "The House of Blue Leaves." He would have more with the screenplay for "Atlantic City" and his play "Six Degrees of Separation." With "Rich and Famous," he seems to be telling himself as much as anybody else, "Remember how superficial much of this can be."

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