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ACT's 'Rich and Famous' a delicious lampoon of both

By **Karen D'Souza**
Mercury News
Posted: 01/15/2009 11:19:03 AM PST

When John Guare's play "Cop-Out" debuted on Broadway in 1969, the critics were less than smitten. One paper said it wasn't so much a review as an obituary.

That's now one of the most zinging lines in "Rich and Famous," a satire about the dark side of celebrity the playwright wrote in 1974. The joke not only nails a laugh, it also hits a nerve, because all the best bits in this wild and woolly parody feel hard-won and true.

Long before "American Idol" minted its first disposable pop star and Robin Leach pushed champagne wishes and caviar dreams, Guare rode the red carpet to hell and back.

Now 70, he has woven much of his own personal tango with yearning, ambition and regret into the character of Bing Ringling. He has said he wrote his first draft in three days, as if in a dream.

Although he has reworked the text for its first major revival at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater, it remains a gorgeous hodgepodge of words and songs that doesn't always hang together but usually amuses.

Director John Rando's ("Urinetown") full-throttle sense of flair makes the outlandish shtick the high point in this uneven romp.

Guare, of course, did eventually hit it big. First "The House of Blue Leaves" and later "Six Degrees of Separation" cemented his reputation for splicing surreal comedy and caustic wit with deep existential dread.

He also wrote the screenplay for Louis Malle's "Atlantic City," and SF Playhouse will revive his "Landscape of the Body" later this season.

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Ringling (a sincere turn by Brooks Ashmanskas) has somehow gone from being an emerging playwright to being a has-been without ever getting his name up in lights.

After 844 scripts, the 35-year-old finally lands a production.

It's not so much off-off-off-Broadway as in a "toilet down on Lower Death Street," but it's his one shot at the big time.

The smell of success has never been more rancid, but if he gets even a whiff of fame, he'll die happy.

Alas, his master opus, "The Etruscan Conundrum," doesn't exactly pack them in.

His flamboyant leading man Aphro (Gregory Wallace, displaying his usual mastery of the arch) forgets his

lines.

His flaky girlfriend Leanara (Mary Birdsong) flees for Los Angeles, and his guaranteed hit-maker producer Veronica (Birdsong again) confesses she backed him to sample the taste of defeat.

Birdsong, beloved as the clueless Deputy Kimball on "Reno 911!" (the one with the braids and the ambiguous sexuality), here oversells the gags.

Birdsong bounces from one routine to another, but it's not until she plays it straight, as Bing's long-lost love, that she shines. She also delivers the show's most memorable musical sequence.

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Indeed, Guare's lampoon might have more heft if the characters were more memorable.

Few of the scenes are as indelible as the production's outlandishly '70s fashions (costumes by Gregory Gale) and decor (sets by Scott Bradley), but there are parodies that embed themselves into the imagination.

Rando pushes the actors way past realism into the land of camp, which is where Stephen DeRosa reigns supreme. The actor doesn't just chew up the scenery — he swallows the production whole in a series of lunatic sketches.

He elicits both pity and fear as Bing's garish polyester-clad dad, whose obsession with his son led him to bronze all the dirty diapers.

Later he milks laughs and shudders as crazy-genius composer Anatol, who lives for fame. He jets off to Germany every now and again to recharge his batteries ... by strangling strangers.

Like a karmic vampire, he sucks the lifeblood from his victims in a bizarre stab at immortality. Having once been hot, he can't stand the thought of being not.

"Rich and Famous"

by **John Guare**

The upshot: The smell of success has never been more rancid than in this newly revised wild and woolly satire.

Where: American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco

Through: Feb. 8

Running time: 100 minutes (no intermission)

Tickets: \$17-\$82; (415) 749-2228; www.act-sf.org

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