


[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Entertainment

[Print](#) | [Email](#)


## ACT season opens rich and famously

By Janos Gereben

Special to The Examiner 1/16/09



Curtains up: Mary Birdsong and Brooks Ashmankas appear in American Conservatory Theater's over-the-top "Rich and Famous." Courtesy photo  
**SAN FRANCISCO** – American Conservatory Theater's first production of 2009, John Guare's "Rich and Famous," bears witness to our return to the 1930s.

Not only is there a parallel between the failing economy, this revised 1974 play also recalls the time when movies about movies and plays about plays were the rage.

"Rich and Famous" opens like gangbusters, with the playwright Bing Ringling fretting outside an off-off-off Broadway theater on the opening night of his play, "The Etruscan Conundrum."

The specifics of the play-within-the-play — which represent Guare's major addition to the San Francisco revision/revival, based on his own youthful "Muzeeka" — are hilarious.

From a reference to "Romulus and Uncle Remus" to subsequent plans for commingling the "Odyssey" and the "Iliad" into the musical "Odiad," a compendium of fun and games combine with Guare's own (judiciously borrowed) musical numbers.

John Rando's frantic direction and Scott Bradley's impressive sets serve the production well.

Led by Brooks Ashmankas' ever-present, never less than explosive Bing Ringling, the cast of four is terrific.

The other three perform in multiple roles: Mary Birdsong's characters range from the outrageously demented producer to the playwright's leading lady and love interest; Gregory Wallace has two roles, shining as the effeminate star of "The Etruscan"; and Stephen DeRosa is manic in four roles, the best being the unstable composer Anatol Torah.

"Rich and Famous" is a crazy romp, an oversized, invariably over-the-top comedy. It is that, and less, although it aspires for more.

The drop in quality comes about halfway through the intermission-less 105-minute play. Three scenes — in a museum, in Ringling's childhood home, and the finale high up over Broadway — pay diminishing returns.

As to the wished-for "more," it comes from an absurd promise of deep meaning. Both Guare and ACT Artistic Director Carey Perloff would have us believe that unlike the '30s comedies, "Rich and Famous" is chock full of redemption.

In a program note, Perloff says the play should be viewed in the context of 'this perilous economic moment in our history, (when) we are all looking and searching and marching. &hellip;we are trying to take responsibility for what has gone so deeply wrong with our economy.'

It seems more expedient to go to the theater to forget about peril and woe. A good portion of "Rich and Famous" provides escape, but none of it is particularly relevant to the glum scene outside the theater, with homeless all around on downtown streets.

When escapist entertainment takes itself seriously, that simply jeopardizes escape and diminishes entertainment — without helping answer the question posed by Perloff, "of what it means to be American in this complicated new world."

## THEATER REVIEW

### Rich and Famous

**Where:** American Conservatory Theater, 405 Geary St., San Francisco


**When:** 8 p.m. most Tuesdays-Saturdays; 2 p.m. most Saturdays-Sundays; closes Feb. 8

**Tickets:** \$17 to \$67

**Contact:** (415) 749-2228, [www.act-sf.org](http://www.act-sf.org)

### Find this article at:

[http://www.sfexaminer.com/entertainment/ACT\\_season\\_opens\\_rich\\_and\\_famously.html](http://www.sfexaminer.com/entertainment/ACT_season_opens_rich_and_famously.html)

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.