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Where's Guare? Way Out West

By TERRY TEACHOUT



San Diego

This hasn't been John Guare's year -- at least not in New York. Not only did the Public Theater scrap the premiere of "A Free Man of Color," his latest play, but the Broadway revival of "Brigadoon," for which Mr. Guare wrote a new book, was also put on hold. In California, though, his stock is soaring, with revivals of "**Six Degrees of Separation**" and "Rich and Famous" opening this month at two of the West Coast's top theaters. We haven't seen much of Mr. Guare's work in New York of late, so I flew west to find out what we've been missing. The answer: a lot.

In 1990 "Six Degrees of Separation" was the play all smart Manhattanites had to see -- partly because Stockard Channing was so good in it, but mostly because Mr. Guare's satire of upper-middle-class folkways was so well timed. Money talked very loudly in 1990, and those who didn't have any longed for a close-up view of the foibles of those who did. Back then I found "Six Degrees" to be clever but shallow, which says far more about me than Mr. Guare. Today it strikes me as one of the strongest American plays of the postwar era, a comedy of liberal manners (and liberal gullibility) whose punch lines are rooted in something more than mere knowingness.

In telling the real-life tale of a young black con man (Samuel Stricklen) who wormed his way into a string of Fifth Avenue apartments by passing himself off as Sidney Poitier's nonexistent son, Mr. Guare tapped into the loneliness and insecurity that have always been part of the American national character. *We are all Gatsbys now*, his characters told us, and their message rings as true in the Age of Obama as it did in the far-off days of Bush the Elder.

Nowadays "Six Degrees" doesn't get done as often as it should, presumably because it calls for a cast of 15 and an expensive-looking set. Not only has San Diego's Old Globe Theatre pulled both commodities out of its institutional hat, but Trip Cullman, the director, has brought off the coup of casting Karen Ziemba in the role that made Ms. Channing a stage star. Ms. Ziemba won a well-deserved Tony for "Contact," but in recent years she's been relegated to second-banana status on Broadway, and this is the first time that I've seen her in a straight play. It was worth the wait: Ms. Ziemba plays Ouisa, the anxious socialite of "Six Degrees," with an open-hearted warmth that puts a fresh and convincing spin on Mr. Guare's script.

Mr. Stricklen doesn't seem slick enough at first glance, but he finds his way into the part, and the other members of Mr. Cullman's cast, Thomas Jay Ryan, Catherine Gowl and Sloan Grenz in particular, are everything they ought to be. As for Andromache Chalfant's set, which is dominated by two well-executed Helen Frankenthaler copies and a Mies van der Rohe daybed, it looks just like the home of a not-quite-rich art dealer who wonders where his next sale is coming from.

Broadway is due for a revival of "Six Degrees of Separation." When it comes, I hope it's this good.

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San Francisco

Though Mr. Guare's brand of comedy often runs to the zany, he never forgets to make you feel. "**Rich and Famous**," now playing at the American Conservatory Theater, is a maniacally funny portrait of Bing Ringling (Brooks Ashmanskas), an unknown playwright who longs in vain to hit the jackpot. Unlike the tightly woven "Six Degrees," "Rich and Famous," which dates from 1976, adds up to a series of sketches, one of which contains a brutal skewering of Leonard Bernstein (Stephen DeRosa), with whom Mr. Guare worked in his youth. Yet its specific emotional gravity is surprisingly high, and the overall effect is less farcical than melancholy, especially in the poignant scene in which Bing, Mr. Guare's maladroit alter ego, runs into an ex-girlfriend (Mary Birdsong) and finds that his failure looks like success from her suburban point of view.

Mr. Guare has given "Rich and Famous" an extensive rewrite for this production. Never having seen the original version, I can't tell you whether this one works better, but it definitely works. John Rando, who directs comedy as well as anyone in America, has staged it to the hilt for A.C.T., and his cast acts accordingly. I laughed my head off, then went home feeling wistful -- which is undoubtedly what Mr. Guare had in mind.

New York

Richard Greenberg is back on Broadway yet again, this time with a revival of "**The American Plan**," the 1990 play that put him on the map. It is, like all his other plays, repellently glib, and seeing it in tandem with "Six Degrees of Separation" also suggests that it is . . . oh, let's be nice and call it derivative. Like "Six Degrees," "The American Plan" is a snapshot of upper-middle-class life that hinges on the deceptions of a presentable young man who turns out to be (A) poor and (B) gay. In "The American Plan," the young man in question (Kieran Champion) is courting a rich girl (Lily Rabe) who is brainy but neurotic, and the air becomes clotted with pseudo-witty one-liners. Enter the Evil Mother (Mercedes Ruehl), followed by the young man's former lover (Austin Lysy). Emotionally fraught hijinks à la Douglas Sirk ensue. What else is new? Nothing whatsoever.

Other people like Mr. Greenberg's stuff, so it may be that I'm temperamentally deaf to his charms -- but I doubt it. Just because Broadway audiences laugh at a play doesn't make it funny. Or smart. Or good.

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