

new leaf



The Dining Room by A.R. Gurney  
Directed by Jessica Hutchinson

## REVIEWS



★★★★☆

It's hard out here for a WASP.

Daddy can't even come in from the golf course for little sis's birthday party. Mum's so suspicious of the girls drinking her gin that the kids have to add water to the bottle after they've stolen some. And gramp is certainly being stodgy about coughing up junior's Latin school tuition, isn't he? In his tart series of vignettes that take place around various dining-room tables of entitlement, playwright Gurney does all he's ever done: wistfully document the decaying, mannered lives of the gentry, those who mistakenly keep secrets and money close to the vest but loved ones at pin-striped sleeve's length. (On the scale of exasperated privilege, Gurney ranks one notch over a Cheever.)

Nevertheless, director Hutchinson's highly seductive in-the-round production is crisply alert and flushed. Her bright actors, several of them relative newcomers, are all asked to play more than two decades on either side of their true ages, yet Hutchinson rarely lets them look foolish. In particular, astringent Marsha Harman offers multiple flavors and maximum precision as several flustered matrons.

Instead of a standout actor, New Leaf seems to have selected *The Dining Room* to showcase its two most rarefied assets: its queerly elegant found space—as intimate as a discreet aside from Mrs. Astor—and its invaluable resident sound designer. As the cast pantomimes all the props to Nick Keenan's recorded, carefully placed effects of delicate papers being rustled or rattling flatware getting polished, you suspect the designer knows even better than the playwright the sound of a WASP's nest.



SUPPER MIME The Dining Room's cast eats and eats and never gains a pound.

— Christopher Piatt

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Chicago Tribune



### ON THE FRINGE

To leap from the plight of the working poor to the neuroses of the old-line rich requires a healthy dose of ironic distance. But the moneyed classes have their problems too, and no playwright has done a better job of anatomizing the American WASP in its native environment than A.R. Gurney. New Leaf Theatre takes advantage of their rich wood-paneled home at the Lincoln Park Cultural Center to present a charming site-specific staging of Gurney's "The Dining Room," a 1982 comedy of dying manners. The audience surrounds the large table that serves as the groaning board for generations of complaints, seductions, heartbreaks, and revelations across several families. The capable cast in Jessica Hutchinson's staging generally manage their multiple roles with steady and understated wit (well, they are WASPs, after all), with particularly noteworthy performances from Steve Wilson and Marsha Harman. The play isn't particularly insightful but if one has never seen it, the intimacy and immediacy of this production make up for the script's hoarier elements.

—Kerry Reid



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Archeologists are often faced with the task of reconstructing entire civilizations from a fragment of bedpost or a few shards of pottery, so there's no crime in playwright A.R. Gurney's tracking a half-century of progress in American society using only a single room.

The years under scrutiny range from the 1930s to the early 1970s, as reflected in the conversations of a family sufficiently well-off to have a house with a fully-equipped dining room—a table and chairs; a panoply of linens and eating utensils; and servants to gather, prepare and dish up the provender.

But Gurney's purpose is not simple nostalgia, but analysis of a tribal subculture. To this end, he forsakes chronological realism, instead presenting his findings as a montage of scenes from various periods, with only hints of filial continuity, thus highlighting small domestic revolutions otherwise overlooked in the big-picture histories: a smug patriarch's fear of Irish and Italian immigrants' influence on the status quo. Adulterous lovers' concerns over the clan repercussions sure to follow disclosure of their transgression. An affluent matron looking to restore her

heirloom furniture under the tutelage of a former stockbroker now turned carpenter. The names and ages of the various maids who remain an indispensable part of the household.

Director Jessica Hutchinson's intent may also have been to guard against modern audiences becoming dazzled by period artifacts, but her decision to approach the play as "the idea of family as explored through the lens of memory" appears to involve re-inventing it along lines recalling the Symbolists of the Belle Epoch. Under this concept, stage props are all but eliminated, characters drinking from invisible glasses while the sound of clinking ice cubes is conveyed electronically—a gimmick that, while executed with admirable precision, draws more attention to itself than would actual set dressing and hand-held tchotchkes.

What most threatens to push the ambience over the top into artsy-academic ambiguity, however, is the funereal tone engendered by ghostly slipcovers whose removal and replacement bracket the play's action, coupled with relentlessly pensive incidental music appropriate for Strindberg, perhaps, but wholly at odds with Gurney's homely Yankee idiom and the anthropologist's emotional detachment. The mostly young actors do their best to ignore these curiously matched motifs, valiantly adhering to their text, but they only barely succeed in rescuing this New Leaf production from surrender to auteur-gone-wild preciosity.

— Mary Shen Barnidge