

A TOP-SHELF COMEDY

By **BARBARA COVELL**
For the *TODAY*

Once again, playwright A. R. Gurney is at the top of his game and Lincoln City's Theatre West isn't pulling any punches. Gurney, who penned such social commentaries as "Love Letters," "Another Antigone," "The Fourth Wall," "Sylvia" and "The Dining Room," is best known for poking fun at upper crust families in the Northeastern United States. The New York Times calls the "Cocktail Hour" an examination of an overprivileged family that fights domestic battles while downing drinks.

Director Bryan Kirsch says this show will make you think.

"I like dark comedies and the first time I heard this script read aloud, I was hooked," he said. "This play has poignancy, humor, angst and is thought provoking — everything I wanted!"

"I think audiences will resonate with the sense of family that this play brings; conflict, discovery, love and regret," he added. "If there's a message here, I would say that would be love and appreciate your family, however flawed they may be."

Gurney's storyline takes place in the 1970s as John, a middle-aged playwright, returns home to his family of privilege with his latest endeavor — a play he has written using the family as somewhat unflattering characters. His stuffed shirt father, Bradley, blusters and pontificates while overseeing wife Ann and daughter Nina, as the drinks smoothly derail the purpose for John's visit — to gain permission to publish his story. Bear in mind that we never see ourselves as others see us, and this tightly wound comedic ensemble of characters find themselves in unflattering situations along with witty, sharp and clever dialogue provided by Gurney.

In the end it is evident that what John has written is closer to the truth than his family has ever been willing to admit, but while they seem shackled to the past, the ties which bind them do prevail — surmounting disputes and disappointments and, with unflinching warmth and humor, converting pained resignation into cautious but hopeful anticipation.

Rich Emery seems destined to play the



PHOTOS BY LEWIS SMITH

role of Bradley, the officious, self-absorbed patriarch and the central character in John's play. Emery is a theater veteran who portrays the complicated, dedicated yet judgmental Bradley, a venerable family elder who carries some regrets into his senior years. Emery's emotional output scores volumes on the tightly wrapped Richter scale of entitled WASPs. Early in the first scene, Bradley sets the rules. "I have three rules about drinking: Never drink before six. Never drink alone, and never drink after dinner."

Cathye Wehr delightfully portrays his doting wife Ann, who blithely smiles through all the recriminations and revelations, while "having another sip" and checking on the nameless maid, whose replaced a nameless cook, in preparing the evening meal. Yet underneath Ann's sweetness lie her own secrets which counter this comedy of manners.

Mary Griffith plays John's older sister, Nina, with great passion. John quickly realizes his hurdle is to overcome her hurt feelings that her character has been given such a minor role. Nina is obsessed with thumbing through the script in an effort to count her scenes and words. The ensuing family discussions about John's play, also

called "The Cocktail Hour" opens the floodgates for Gurney to mock the patrician class, as well as the theater scene.

And do not miss newcomer Jim Sinnitt who gives an outstanding performance as John, the son who chronicles the family legacy by writing, "The Cocktail Hour." He delivers.

"When I direct," Kirsch said, "I most enjoy watching the actors develop their characters, and bring them to life."

Playwright Gurney gives each character the material to uncover multiple levels of humanity with humor and painful self-enlightenment.

A. R. Gurney said this play was "probably the most personal thing I had written up to this time". He added, "The play tries to work within the traditions of a comedy of manners, and simultaneously challenge those traditions as outmoded if not destructive." It is an exploration of the human psyche while constrained to outdated norms.

This play is best suited for adult audiences. While Gurney keeps a lid on expletives, the theme is clearly directed at middle aged to senior audiences.

The set for this show is a lovely, inviting, upper class living room with a bar as the



focal point. Two loveseats give the actors room to move about while also implying there is no place to go.

In addition to Kirsch as director is Patricia Canon as assistant director and set designer. Donna Morris is stage manager and Amy Egner Goodman runs the lights and sound. Kirsch says the entire cast and crew built the set, and helped assemble props and costumes.

"As a director, I have been blessed," he says.

"*The Cocktail Hour*" is on the Theatre West stage at 3536 SE Hwy. 101, Lincoln City. It runs on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights through March 28. Showtime is promptly at 7:30 pm. There is a special Sunday matinee on March 22 at 2 pm. Tickets, \$15 for adults and \$13 for students/seniors, can be reserved by calling 541-994-5663.