

Fall of the House of Brewster

Arsenic & Old Lace held together by sharp direction, strong performances

Leave it to Friedrich Nietzsche — the prophetic philosopher who notoriously pronounced God's demise — to capture the disturbing truth lurking behind one of our screwball comedies. "One has watched life badly if one has not also seen the hand that in a considerate manner — kills," Nietzsche wrote in 1886, anticipating not only the subject matter, but also the spirit and dark humor of Joseph Kesselring's 1939 play, *Arsenic & Old Lace*. Too bad old Fred didn't live nearly long enough to see it staged; he might have gotten a kick out of watching his existential theories personified in the form of two spinster sisters who, very considerably indeed, euthanize their bachelor wards out of pity for the men's loneliness.

The play was brought to the screen by director Frank Capra, whose 1944 adaptation features Cary Grant in the role of Mortimer Brewster, nephew of the matronly murderers, Abby and Martha Brewster. Likely this is the *Arsenic & Old Lace* most of us think of when we hear the title, whether we've seen the movie or not. And if, like me, your memories of the movie are a bit befogged by time, LCC's current production should come as something of a surprise, and a pleasant one at that.

Under Michael P. Watkins' orthodox and sure-handed direction, and thanks to some exemplary performances, *Arsenic & Old Lace* comes off as the splendidly mean-spirited and cleverly layered piece of inverted and self-referential satire its author surely intended it to be, while at the same time moving at a breezy clip that is downright infectious. It is at once entirely shallow and complexly philosophical, a laugh riot that leaves an aftertaste of cyanide and cynicism.

The play presents the bare outlines of a standard romantic comedy, complete with issues of mistaken identity, thwarted desires and miscommunications real and imagined and with everything ending in happy commitment — though not to the institution of marriage. Mortimer (Richard Burton) is a charming if distracted bachelor whose forbearing girlfriend, Elaine (Ailiah Schafer), waits with strained patience for a proposal of marriage. Mort's childhood

home — presided over by his doting, sweetly naïve-seeming aunts Abigail (Christina St. Charles) and Martha (Lorna Bridges) — does seem a bit nutty at times, what with his uncle Teddy (Johnny Rogers) believing himself to be Teddy Roosevelt and all. And there is the hushed, vaguely sinister talk about Mort's long-lost brother Jonathan (Chas King), but what family doesn't have its peccadilloes and little secrets?

Kesselring took this archetypal scenario and turned it inside out and upside down. In the subtlest and most hilarious of manners, the play brings the outside world to bear on this seemingly hermetic family, introducing timely issues of jingoism, homophobia and rampant nationalism, while at the same time tackling the prickly ethical question of justifiable homicide. The amazing thing is how giddy it all is — like Dostoyevsky on nitrous oxide.

LCC's production gets it right in allowing the script to do its work. The stage design is simultaneously spacious and cozy, lulling the audience into a false sense of security while also giving the cast plenty of room to move. Watkins keeps the action tight, with few wasted gestures, and his pacing is snappy. In the best sense, he gets out of the way of the material.

Beyond the sheer enjoyment of Kesselring's script, there are some noteworthy performances that give this production an added zing. In terms of talent and range, the cast is quite uneven; fortunately, the old adage about a team being only as strong as its weakest link doesn't apply in this instance. The strongest performances are exactly where they need to be. Burton's Mortimer is a bit tepid in the early scenes, but he catches stride by the second act. Rogers, who has an obvious knack for physical humor, walks a fine tightrope as the delusional, quirky Teddy, but his antics remain just this side of overindulgence. Ultimately, however, it is Bridges and St. Charles, as the pious, pleasantly poisonous Brewster sisters, who carry the show. Their repartee, a blend of sibling intimacy, homespun malarkey and conspiratorial commitment to their own twisted cause, is a pleasure to behold. Like that one song, they kill you — softly. **EW**

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