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Walter Lazenby

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'Man Who Came to Dinner' Disappointing

By WALTER LAZENBY

CHARLESTON — First off: I admit that fond memories of other productions of Kaufman and Hart's "The Man Who Came to Dinner" probably caused me to expect too much from Eastern's current version. Next: I must admit to disappointment in the opening night performance. Considering that many persons involved have themselves helped to establish or have maintained the high standards against which I measure this show, I hardly know how to account for an unaccustomed hit here and there of amateurishness and the impression that the whole doesn't jell.

The script should not present overwhelming difficulties for collegiate actors, though it does demand, in several roles, polished and articulate delivery and does contain allusions to personalities whose names are no longer household words (Polly Adler, Lord Beaverbrook, William Beebe). It is in fact very playable.

A Review

It has abundant potential for amusement at the bohemian behavior of 1907's equivalent of today's Beautiful People. Among them: A highly sophisticated, self-centered playwright and song-writer modeled after Noel Coward (who, incidentally, would certainly know how to pronounce "Derby" and "Anfibes"); a gossipy, bed-hopping actress ambitious to marry an English Lord vaguely suggesting Tallulah Bankhead; and a near carbon-copy of Harpo Marx.

These social butterflies' descent on their friend Sheridan Whiteside, confined unwillingly in a stuffy Midwestern household, provides funny and perhaps instructive contrasts between ways of life.

Through these, I suspect, the authors were reiterating a theme from another collaboration, "You Can't Take It With You"; namely that one should do one's thing regardless of middle-class inhibitions.

Certainly Whitesides' verbal license — his absolute mastery of invective — gives vicarious satisfaction to those in the audience who habitually repress their urges to say exactly what they think and slightly shames those who have mouthed hypocritical statements because "it's not nice" to insult others. His character is based on well-known critic Alexander Woolcott.

The plot leads this towering ego through several meddling escapades. He attempts to persuade the younger Stanleys to become their "true" selves; he tries to break-up a romance between his secretary Maggie and a newspaper man; he exposes a ruse that would have made his actress

friend a laughingstock; and he solves a mystery of identity (Where has he seen THAT FACE before?).

Unfortunately, in the performance the efforts of some of the actors to shout the lines and to whip up phony excitement are all too evident; it becomes disturbingly clear that they have no vocal reserve left to underpin their thespian resources. Some grossly overact so that the result is caricature.

But a few achieve the naturalness that allows the spectator to think of them as people in a situation rather than as actors on a stage. Notable among them: Randy Haeg as Richard Stanley, Earl Halbe as the newspaper man, and in cameo roles Julie Woosley as the "spacey" Harriet Stanley and Scott Zimmerman as Professor Metz, the world's authority on the mating habits of the cockroach.

I thought Arn Kleckner and James Kleckner well cast as Lorraine Sheldon

and Beverly Carlton, though I think more theatricality and exaggeration could be expected from Lorraine and more suavity from Beverly.

Rich Schneider appears well cast as Whiteside and Kris Salamone catches an appropriate conversational quality, though more energy would improve her characterization as Maggie.

I find no fault with the good old-fashioned set, executed with careful attention to detail. Costumes, too, have been carefully worked up to be complete and authentic as to period, but I can't help thinking that Lorraine's "working clothes" in Act Two show a lapse from the taste that the character is supposed to have. In stage directions she is described as one of the Ten Best-dressed Women, yet this outfit forces her to hobble like Mae West. Funny — yes; but altogether inappropriate.

The play closes with a matinee Sunday.

Thursday 9 March 1978