



Lakewood's 'Man Who Came to Dinner' keeps up the screwball tradition Posted November 8, 2009 12:52 PM

Hilarious one-liners, witty retorts, lashings of farce, and a sweet romance: These elements fuel “The Man Who Came to Dinner,” the prize 1939 screwball comedy by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart. The three-act fills the stage at Lakewood Theatre with wonderful energy and all the right nuances, thanks to a cast giddy with stage entrances and exits, and brisk, smoothing pacing from director Joe Theissen.

The show’s history is grounded in reality. Kaufman and Hart wanted to write a vehicle for their eccentric friend, critic and radio personality Alexander Woollcott but came up with nothing until Woollcott visited Hart’s country estate and proceeded to take over the house and terrorize the staff with his numerous demands. Laughing about the episode later with Kaufman, Hart said he was lucky that Woollcott hadn’t broken his leg and been forced to stay on. The playwrights looked at each other, a light bulb went on and the idea for a play was born.

Sheridan Whiteside became the vitriolic central character in “Dinner,” here played by Tobias Andersen, whose expressive face is rigid with righteousness one moment and smirking with glee the next. Whiteside has set the rather conservative Stanley household on its ear as the play begins. He’s fractured his hip while visiting a family in a small town in Ohio and can’t leave, so he imperiously gives orders from a wheelchair as people scatter to run errands on command.

The phone rings, the doorbell chimes and all the messages and visitors are for Whiteside. H.G. Wells calls from London, Walt Disney phones from Hollywood, and distinguished friends in show biz pop in from far places, including celebrities such as the debonair Beverly Carlton (based on Noel Coward), the self-important actress Lorraine Sheldon (Margie Boulé) and Banjo (Garland Lyons), a character shaped after Harpo Marx.

Amid the activity, Maggie (Jill Westerby), Whiteside’s secretary, slings acid comments back and forth with her boss (“You would have your mother burned at the stake if that was the only way you could light your cigarette,” she remarks). Despite their differences, they’ve got a great affection for each other, but when she falls in love with a newspaperman who has come to interview Whiteside, he plots to break up the two so she won’t leave, and all hell breaks loose.

What’s fun here are the topical references of the era and the thinly disguised parodies of several celebrities from the 1930s. Even if we’re not familiar with them, they’re highly enjoyable, a mini-history lesson of sorts.

The supporting cast that revolves around Andersen is strong, particularly those in cameo roles. Boulé, in satin and furs, sashays and slithers as self-absorbed Lorraine, who moves from saccharine sweet to harpie mode in a flash. As Beverly Carlton, Samuel Hawkins hams it up gloriously. And in the small part of the eccentric Harriet Stanley, MaryAnne Glazebrook sketches an intriguing wacko whose shocking identity is revealed at the end.

Westerby is solid and delightful as Maggie, and Jeff Gorham as her swain Bert Jefferson has leading-man charisma to burn and a great drunk scene in the last act. Garland Lyons, as the Harpo Marx figure named Banjo, proves himself a compelling comic actor with chameleon-like skills, someone to look out for in the Portland theater world.

The action spills over on a spacious Craftsman-style living room set well designed for the huge cast by Robert Vaughn.

“Dinner” may be called an old chestnut, but it’s also a comic classic about human nature that’s timeless.

-- Holly Johnson