

REVIEW

'Dining Room' a stage feast

BY MICHAEL CASPER

For the Mirror

The Pennsylvania Centre Stage rendition of "The Dining Room" is nothing short of stunning. While A. R. Gurney's signature 1982 work may show some age, it resonates, troubles, engages and provokes laughter with a timeless quality when done properly. The actors take even a familiar situation and give it fresh tension, levity and chemistry.

Each actor takes on nine or ten different roles, fired in rapid succession via changing costumes and with characters ranging from young children to slow-moving elders, all in the same dining room setting. The period conjured ranges from the 1930s to the 1980s.

That four of the six players are Penn State MFA students about to graduate is a tribute to the theatre program they represent. Cast by Mark Simon and under the direction of Cary Libkin, they rise to the heavyweight charge of multiple roles and diverse interactions with grace and poise.

Following a thread of disjointed scenarios, the viewer has just enough time for one scenic conclusion to

resonate before the next situation begins. In fact, characters and props from an oncoming scene often overlap with the action spinning out onstage.

If you go

What: "The Dining Room," presented by Pennsylvania Centre Stage

When: 7:30 p.m. today, Thursday, June 23 through 25; 2 p.m. June 20, 21, 24, 27 & 28; 8 p.m. June 19, 26 & 27

Where: Penn State Downtown Theatre Center, State College

Tickets: \$24, \$30 and \$55

Numerous situations alternately elicit guffaws and fidgeting in only a few minutes' time, as where Jeff Talbott plays the aloof, meticulous father previewing his funeral plans with his son, played by Johnny Russell. Talbott is also riveting as a tough father at the breakfast table or a young boy at a birthday party. Russell is compelling as father, son, carpenter or psychiatrist.

Blaine Smith is versatile as a geeky young boy, pre-college teenager and gal-

lant father of the house ready to defend the family name. Brigid Brady is natural as a silly little girl, real estate agent or dallying housewife. Stephanie Stroud is equally convincing as an alcohol-sneaking teen or the lady of the house reviewing her prized dinner service. Jessie Datino is delightful as the German maid and endearing as the grandma in the throes of what is recognized today as Alzheimer's.

The symbolism of this room in domestic life is framed both narrowly and broadly. Never having looked under a dining room table, the lady of the house (Brady) is both intrigued and shocked to find this bit of furniture is really only a couple of wide boards. And in a similar role in the final scene, Brady shares a vision she dreamt of inviting everyone she ever knew and appreciated in life come to a party in her dining room. What a lovely image to leave viewers with as we return to our respective lives.

Dan Robinson's classic scenic design gives ample room for each scene to make its own impression, and William Schroeder's myriad costuming details work well and create effective character changes.