

O.K. L.A.: "California Suite"

River Cities Reader – October 10, 2007 – by Mike Schulz

For my money, *California Suite* is the ideal Neil Simon play, as it's actually composed of four independent one-act plays, giving you far less chance to grow exhausted by his characters' persistent wisecracking.

Yet the happy surprise - the shock - of the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's production of the show is that the performers and director Jalayne Riewerts soften and humanize Simon's playlets so that you don't grow exhausted by *any* of them. More often than not, the actors hit their marks and score their laughs, yet they do so truthfully; the characters here aren't quite the relentlessly Simon-ized joke machines that tend to drive his detractors batty. This *California Suite* is sure to tickle fans of the author, but it might impress the *rest* of us even more.

In her director's notes, Riewerts acknowledges the playwright's polarizing effect by writing, "For some people, the mention of a Neil Simon play makes their stomachs turn." Personally, it's not that my stomach turns so much as my teeth ache. Even when his jokes are funny - and, in *California Suite*, a bunch of them are - Simon's works are maddening because his characters don't have individual voices; everyone in them comes equipped with an arsenal of witty comebacks and clever phraseology regardless of whether the characters, as established, would actually *be* that witty or clever. In most Simon plays, it doesn't matter a whit who says what, because everyone sounds the *same*.

Brava to Riewerts, then, for ensuring that none of *California Suite's* one-acts feels quite like the others. Simon's contributions can't be completely ignored; the verbal-tennis-match sequences, here, alternate with ones heavy on slapstick physical comedy, lending the presentation some variety. But the director has also shrewdly cast the show with a welcome variety of acting styles.

In the "Visitors from Philadelphia" piece, middle-aged Marvin Michaels (Archie Williams) attempts to keep his wife (Stacey Herrick) from noticing the passed-out hooker (Karen Pittenger) in the bedroom, and it may be the production's most purely enjoyable segment. Throwing himself from one room to the next in fits of barely concealed apoplexy, Williams is wonderfully dynamic, and the combination of his little-boy-lost vocals and his sizable physique yields unexpected comic rewards; he's like Lenny in *Of Mice & Men* reincarnated as Dudley Moore in "10."

And once Marvin's ruse is (literally) uncovered, Herrick's already-fine performance grows into a marvelous one, her incredulous contempt earning hugely satisfying laughs. The two play off each other terrifically well - Pittenger, for her part, remains admirably unconscious - and thankfully, Riewerts doesn't force her actors into the exaggerated Jewish stereotypes the piece calls for. (Simon includes far too many cracks about the Michaels' thriftiness.) The decision may make the bar-mitzvah references seem odd, but it improves on the original piece *significantly*.

Similar screwball antics occur in the climactic "Visitors from Chicago," which features real-life married couples Jeff and Liz Blackwell and Mike and Jackie Skiles as best friends now ready to kill one another at the tail end of a three-week vacation. Neither the gags nor the slapstick is as inspired here as in "Philadelphia" - the violence, some of it involving broken ankles and broken glass, actually teeters on the edge of unpleasant - but the actors seem to be having a ball hurling fists and obscenities at one another, and the pacing never lags; it's brief, kinda brutal, and much funnier than it should be.

Classier laughs (well, as classy as Simon *gets*) come courtesy of "Visitors from London," in which that splendid comedienne Diane Greenwood portrays an Oscar-nominated actress readying for the Academy Awards ceremony, and Stan Weimer plays her resigned, sexually ambiguous husband. Always an electric stage presence, Greenwood spits out Simon's bon mots with devastating precision - she knows exactly where her British cadences should rise and fall for maximum impact - and Weimer's warm, relaxed underplaying is a perfect match for his co-star's finely calibrated overplaying. The second half turns a bit maudlin, but Riewerts and her actors keep the sentimentality in check; the piece ends on a lovely, touching note of acceptance.

Of the four one-acts, only the opening "Visitors from New York" is a disappointment, not because Lorrie Halsall and Larry Lord - as a divorced couple fighting over custody of their daughter - aren't playing it honestly, but because it's material that no one conceivably *could* play honestly. (In the *California Suite* movie, even Jane Fonda and Alan Alda didn't pull it off.) The biting comebacks and general bitchiness of Halsall's character makes her an incredible pill, and Lord's role is that of an easygoing sap, so there's no fun to be had in their repartee; if it weren't for a few good jokes (one concerning the Mecca of New York City is especially sharp), it would make for a tough slog. But three out of four in Richmond Hill's latest ain't bad at all, and for someone with a built-in aversion to *California Suite's* playwright, it's damn near *miraculous*.

Richmond Hill Barn reopens as a `California Suite'

Dispatch/Argus – October 11, 2007 - by Julie Jensen

If you think of California as a laid-back locale, Neil Simon's "California Suite," now playing at the Richmond Hill Barn, may change your mind. The New York playwright creates violence, both physical and emotional, between and among four separate sets of occupants of the same suite in the Beverly Hills Hotel.

Jalayne Riewerts directs this frequently physical interchange among visitors from New York City, Philadelphia, London and Chicago, giving endless variety to drunkenness and letting it all hang out.

The first pair, the Warrens, are New Yorkers. They're divorced, and they meet to decide the future of their 17-year-old daughter. Hannah, the wife, played by Lorrie Halsall, enjoys acerbic banter, making fun of William (Billy), who "went sane" when he moved to California, gave up his vices and took up healthy sports. Her lover is an unhealthy journalist, and she says her daughter loves her but doesn't like her -- "a normal mother-daughter relationship." Hannah doesn't get what she came for, but she shows some generosity in making the decision involved.

Next we meet Marvin Michaels (Archie Williams) who wakes up at 11 a.m. because he forgot to ask for a wake-up call. An empty vodka bottle beside the bed explains his condition, and a further revelation in the bed is a comatose hooker who never says a word. He drags her around, trying to find a way to get rid of her because his wife is on her way up to the suite.

Mr. Williams really gives a strenuous performance that works up a sweat, and when his wife Millie, (Stacey Herrick) arrives in the suite, he becomes even more manic. They're here for their nephew's Bar Mitzvah, and Millie, whose suitcase has been lost, wants to climb into the bed and take a nap. When Bunny, the hooker (Karen Pittenger) throws the covers off, the jig is up. Marvin explains that his brother paid for the hooker, and what Millie does with all that is quite surprising.

Act III features Diane Greenwood as Diana Nichols and Stan Weimer as her husband, Sidney Nichols. The Londoners are in Hollywood for the Oscars, and Diana is a nominee. Ms. Greenwood's mobile features are as expressive as ever, as she fusses with her attire, saying she has a lump on her shoulder and "looks like Richard III." Sidney, the husband, is an antique dealer, and he has some baggage that isn't apparent until the second of two scenes.

Diana loses and comes back to the suite staggeringly drunk. She crawls on the floor, collapses and asks, "Was I hit by a bus?" During this interlude we learn that Sidney is a bisexual who has met a choice young male at the Oscars. The Nichols' marriage may not be a typical union, but it goes on.

The final group is four visitors from Chicago, Mort and Beth Hollender, played by Jeff and Liz Blackwell, and Stu and Gert Franklin, played by Mike and Jackie Skiles. The friends have been vacationing together, and Beth is moaning with pain after injuring her foot on the tennis court.

"I heard something snap," she said, "and I said, `Please, God, let it be my brassiere.'" They finally get her to the bed, but her troubles have just begun. Everybody keeps falling on the foot.

Gert bumps her head on the medicine cabinet and passes out on the floor. She also breaks a \$90 bottle perfume and bleeds from the glass cuts. The men start to fight with a chair and a tennis racket, Mort chokes Stu, and there's general mayhem until Mort announces "We're not leaving this room until we make up as friends!" Fat chance? With people like this, anything can happen. Choose your vacation companions with care!

Richmond Hill Players have 'Suite' success

Quad City Times – October 11, 2007 - by Ruby Nancy

Neil Simon's "California Suite," which opened this past weekend at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo, Ill., is actually a series of four short plays.

All set in a suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel, they involve visitors from various other cities, with the only common thread to tie them together being the location.

In some ways the material is classic Simon — there are zingers galore, plenty of scenes with a sitcom feel, and a mix of verbal and physical humor with variable results — but the often-superb direction and several first-rate performances elevate a couple of the mini-plays beyond expectations.

The show begins with "Visitor from New York," which finds a jaded Manhattan divorcee of a certain age (played by the much younger Lorrie Halsall) meeting with her ex (played by Larry Lord), who has shed his New York persona over the past decade-and-a-half in favor of a decidedly California manner. Hannah's flip exterior is a brittle construction that barely hides her emotionally vulnerable state, and an eventual meltdown is only a matter of time.

Perhaps it is the age disparity, absence of ennui or the geographic disconnect, but Halsall's performance here is adequate rather than revelatory. There is the issue of accent and mannerisms, which can be difficult for the rest of us to emulate, but it is the pervading unhappiness and high-instep desperation that doesn't quite come across. She does bring an emotional authenticity to the scene's last few minutes that is important, but there isn't quite the contrast with Lord's character that could have made the scene more effective. Lord's laidback performance is more on the money, with a tangle of strong emotions just barely visible through a veneer of cultivated ease.

"Visitors from Philadelphia" centers on Marvin Michaels, who has awakened late after a night of heavy drinking to find an unconscious young woman in his hotel bed, just as his wife is due to join him in town for a family bar mitzvah. Archie Williams is wonderful as the hapless Marvin, bringing an infectious energy to his portrayal of a comically desperate husband. Stacey McKean Herrick is also quite good as Millie Michaels, who shows up — sans luggage — in the suite, giving an urban, Midwestern directness to the role that is dead-on. The comic lines and performances are both excellent, making the scene a highly entertaining bit of theater.

In a stunning, very un-Simon-like Act Three, Stan Weimer and Diane Greenwood appear in "Visitors from London," and they give perfectly done performances of amazing emotional depth. Greenwood is an aging, slightly high-strung film star who finally has been nominated for an Oscar, and Weimer is her gentle husband of many years. Both bring raw feeling and emotional authenticity to their work, and the result is simply fantastic, utterly moving theater. Director Jalayne Riewerts has paired experienced and talented performers with some of Simon's best writing ever, and the amazing final product — more drama than comedy — is a glorious experience.

The final act, "Visitors from Chicago," is a slapstick mosh that deteriorates quickly into a series of sight gags and noisy scuffles. A pair of married couples (both on and off the stage) who are unsuccessfully vacationing together make up the entire comic conceit of this past playlet, and while it is plenty entertaining, this particular piece would have been more enjoyable had it not followed the intensity of the previous one. This segment suffers from costuming issues, too, with quasi-tennis outfits that definitely do not look like they would be worn at a hotel in Beverly Hills.

On the whole, this "California Suite" is a good show with plenty to entertain. Compared with most other comedies produced in this market, any of these short plays would hold up pretty well — and it is only their proximity to "Visitors from London" that makes the other three pale ever so slightly by comparison.

This is a chance to see a number of fine actors in a variety of scenes, all helmed by an uber-talented director, so don't miss the chance to make a reservation for "California Suite."

Jackie and Mike Skiles take their marriage onstage

Dispatch/Argus –by Claudia Loucks

Husband and wife Mike and Jackie Skiles have been cast in the same Richmond Hill Players production before, but they've never had the opportunity to interact with each other on stage.

Until now.

The Geneseo couple play husband and wife in Richmond Hill's current comedy, "California Suite." The play is a collection of four scenes involving couples, and the final scene, "Visitors from Chicago," is about two married couples who take a vacation together, and just how "not relaxing" the vacation turns out to be.

Mike Skiles is cast as Stu and Jackie Skiles plays Gert, and both admit they are excited about the show and their scene. "This is a very physical scene with slapstick humor," Mrs. Skiles said. "At our age, it may prove to be quite a challenge."

Both Skileses are involved with Richmond Hill Players in many different capacities, onstage and backstage, operating lights and sound and working on crew, not to mention their hours in the box office and with concessions.

They met as teens while both were members of the former Knights Drum & Bugle Corps. At that time in their lives, both say, they were more focused on music than theater.

Mrs. Skiles became involved in Youth Theater in Geneseo in the early 1970s. Her mother, Laura Favre of Geneseo, was the first secretary for Richmond Hill Players, so daughter Jackie was "recruited very early."

She left the theater when she joined the Knights, then went on to college and married. But in 1997 she was recruited by her mother to work backstage on a Richmond Hill production, and she re-entered the theater community.

Mr. Skiles said his wife "coerced him into accepting a role when another actor had to drop out." Even though he is hesitant to appear on stage, he said, he has found a love for the theater.

Their experience at Richmond Hill includes "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" in 2000; "The Unexpected Guest" in 2002; "Getting and Spending" in 2003; "The Good Doctor" and "Another Part of the Forest" in 2005, and the current show, "California Suite."