



HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS: (L to R) Jessica Hecht & Judith Light in *The Assembled Parties*. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

Family saga not perfectly *Assembled*

THE ASSEMBLED PARTIES

Written by Richard Greenberg

Directed by Lynne Meadow

Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

261 West 47th Street

(212-239-6200), www.ManhattanTheatreClub.com

By David NouNou

Have you ever received a beautifully wrapped Christmas gift and then opened it to find a nifty gray wool scarf inside? One gets the same feeling watching Richard Greenberg's *The Assembled Parties*, a gorgeously packaged show that never quite delivers.

Handsomely mounted, by the brilliant set designer Santo Loquasto with a magnificent rotating set of a 14-room Central Park West apartment, the action takes place on two Christmas Days at the Bascovs; one in 1980 and the second in 2000. The Bascovs are affluent but we don't know how the money was made, for neither Julie (Jessica Hecht), nor her husband Ben (Jonathan Walker), came from money. We do know that Julie made four movies when she was young but she gave up her career when she married Ben. They have two children: Scotty (Jake Silberman); a law student; and a five-year-old Timmy (Alex Dreier). These are some of the few concrete things we know.

Act I, set on Christmas Day 1980, introduces the Bascovs (they are definitely a Jewish family and for no apparent reason celebrate Christmas, and that is a new one even for me), awaiting the arrival of Ben's sister Faye (the ever-glorious Judith Light); her crass husband, Mort (Mark Blum); and their dim daughter Shelley (Lauren Blumenfeld). In this mix is Jeff (Jeremy Shamos), a law student friend of Scotty's who has insinuated himself into their lifestyle. The conversations between all the characters are taking place all over this magnificent revolving apartment. Hints are made of infidelity, blackmail, discontented marriages, a ruby necklace, punishments, and possibilities of the future.

Act II is set on Christmas Day 2000 in the decaying, seen-better-days living room. A lot of characters that were introduced in Act I are now gone and we are left with Julie, Faye, Jeff, and Timmy. As in real life to anyone things that start in one direction usually end up in a different one. So it is with these remaining four, 20 years later and they are dealing with their present-day life. Whereas in real life we usually know what leads us to this point. In *The Assembled Parties*, Mr. Greenberg doesn't give us any solid evidence; he just hints at things and sets up plot twists that are more contrived for effect rather than anything actually developed or leading to a **resolution**.

The real standout of this play is Judith Light. She infuses freshness in the most mundane of lines,

“A Jewish Republican is like a skinny fat person”. Her Faye could be the sister of her Tony Award-winning role Silda in last year’s brilliant *Other Desert Cities*. From her first entrance, as a bitter woman who married beneath her level over the span of 20 years, Faye has learned to mellow out and her transformation is beguiling. However, Jessica Hecht as Julie is a puzzlement. She is delicate and leads an almost delusional life. She wants everything in life to be "lovely". She has the annoying way of a privileged person of undermining someone for no apparent reason, not because she is mean; it just comes out of her. Ms. Hecht delivers a simple one syllable word and stretches it to four syllables, and after a while it becomes grating.

Jeremy Shamos as Jeff, the guest or intruder (it is never made clear), is certainly emerging as an engaging actor coming into his own. His transformation of the infatuated law student to the successful lawyer and Julie’s devoted and ardent admirer is formidable. From his Tony-nominated role in last year’s *Clybourne Park* to earlier this season holding his own with Al Pacino and Bobby Cannavale in *Glengarry, Glen Ross*, Mr. Shamos is heading into leading-man territory.

Ms. Meadow has done her best in directing the play and the cast. One wishes she could have done more to focus Mr. Greenberg’s narrative. Instead of giving answers, it leaves one with unanswered questions. We know there is a beginning and there is an end, but where is the middle? After all, this is not meant to be an obtuse Pinter play. One must remember that Mr. Greenberg wrote the brilliant Tony Award-winning play *Take Me Out*. However, Mr. Greenberg also wrote the misguided stage adaptation of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, which just closed after receiving scathing reviews. Enough said.

Edited by Scott Harrah

Published April 21, 2013

Reviewed at press performance on April 20, 2013

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