



TOP-NOTCH ACTORS OF *GOOD PEOPLE*: (left to right) Becky Ann Baker, Frances McDormand, Estelle Parsons in David Lindsay-Abaire's new drama. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Must-see *Good People* showcases great acting



Good People

Written by David Lindsay-Abaire

Directed by Daniel Sullivan

Through May 8, 2011

Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

261 W. 45th Street

(212-239-6200), www.mtc-nyc.org

By Scott Harrah

Good People is an intricately crafted drama that seamlessly depicts the economic hardships of modern-day America. Playwright David Lindsay-Abaire, who won a Pulitzer for his last Broadway show *Rabbit Hole*, obviously has a gift for creating outstanding roles for women, for the character of Margaret (Frances McDormand, giving one of the best stage performances of the season) has all of the earmarks of what is sure to be an unforgettable female in American theater history. She is a loud, blue-collar Irish-American woman from South Boston who commands our attention from the very first scene, in which she is fired from her job at a dollar store by her boss, Stevie (Patrick Carroll). The remainder of this simply constructed story is what happens in Margaret's quest to find another job.

Along the way, we meet such characters as Dottie (the always exquisite Estelle Parsons), Margaret's chain-smoking landlady who spends her time making kitschy craft rabbits, complete with tacky glue-on "googly eyes," and best friend Jean (Becky Ann Baker). Without giving too much of the plot away, most of the action centers on Mike (Tate Donovan), Margaret's ex-boyfriend from her high-school days. When she learns that he is back in the Boston area, now a doctor and living in upscale Chestnut Hill, she approaches him for a job, but things do not go as planned. In Margaret's eyes, Mike has distanced himself from his "Southie" roots and has now become "lace-curtain Irish," the disparaging term Irish-Americans use to describe working-class Irish (either in the USA or back in the Emerald Isle motherland) with pretensions of being middle class. However, Mike has gone beyond mere middle class to bona-fide affluence, with his Ivy League, University of Pennsylvania med-school degree, thriving practice, and sprawling suburban home. Anyone who falsely insists that the class systems no longer exists in America need look no further than *Good People* to see that, in 2011, we are a country of the proverbial "haves"

and "have nots" because there really is no such thing as "middle class" anymore—certainly not on the East Coast, at least.

The story, though intriguing with its many plot twists, is not what makes *Good People* an instant classic. The real thrill here is seeing Frances McDormand giving an electrifying performance that keeps us riveted from scene to scene. Ms McDormand, who won an Oscar for her portrayal of Marge Olmstead Gunderson, the pregnant Minnesota policewoman in the 1996 film *Fargo*, is that rare American actress who has actually mastered many of the regional accents of our nation. However, unlike *Fargo*, in which McDormand's delivery of twangy Minnesota-tinged dialogue was done for laughs, her Margaret is hardly a comic heroine. Ms. McDormand adds a layer of sympathy to a character that is not always likable. Her take on a down-on-her-luck, middle-aged South Boston woman is remarkably subtle, multidimensional, and at times, heartbreaking. Margaret is not a woman truly defined by her class, but rather by the choices she made in life (or lack thereof); and she is a theatrical character that, like Williams' Blanche DuBois or Miller's Willy Loman, reflects a tragic, realistic dark side of the American psyche.

It would have been so easy for the cast to simply play their characters as Boston stereotypes—we have all seen many films recently about blue-collar people in Massachusetts—but director Daniel Sullivan has reeled everyone's performances in so that they come off as both natural and beautifully convincing. David Lindsay-Abaire's script has volumes to say about race, class, and gender roles, and Mr. Sullivan's fluid direction keeps the action moving at a brisk pace. Ultimately, with such actors as Ms. McDormand, Ms. Parsons, Ms. Baker, Mr. Donovan, and company, *Good People* is a forum for stage acting at its best.

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Broadway Listings

Broadway Capsule Reviews by David NouNou

ORIGINAL DRAMAS



GREAT ACTING IN *GOOD PEOPLE*: (left to right) Becky Ann Baker, Estelle Parsons, Frances McDormand. Photo: Joan Marcus



GOOD PEOPLE

I am happy to announce that the official 2011 spring theatrical season has opened with a smash. David Lindsay-Abaire's *Good People* is his second consecutive home run for the Manhattan Theatre Club. Whether dealing with the loss of a child as Becca has to in *Rabbit Hole*, or Margaret losing her job due to extenuating circumstances in *Good People*, Mr. Lindsay-Abaire's topics seem unsavory subject matters with which to deal. After all, how can the loss of a child or, in these difficult times, having to watch someone lose their job and desperately trying to cling on to any chance of finding another be palatable entertainment? Mr. Lindsay-Abaire knows how. He knows how to write crisp, emotional dialogue doused with humor and multidimensional characters that sustain our interest. Even better, he knows how to write wonderful parts for women. In a season that is teeming with terrific parts for men, how great is it to have a writer that can pen satisfying and enjoyable parts for women. Needless to say, his women come off better than his men do.

Frances McDormand, as the equally sympathetic and repellent Margaret, is nothing short of brilliant. Her desperation is palpable. She knows her shortcomings and what it is like to be trapped in a place (South Boston) where she has no chance of ever getting away from. Tate Donovan as Mike, the one who was able to break away to go get an education and become a doctor and get married, also happens to be Margaret's former boyfriend, and she now comes groveling to him for a job. He plays his part with equal measures caddishness and insensitivity. It is great to welcome back the wonderful Estelle Parsons as the opportunistic Dottie, who also happens to be Margaret's landlady. Her timing and delivery of acidic lines are priceless.

Becky Ann Baker (Jean), Margaret's loud and best friend; Patrick Carroll (Stevie), Margaret's former employer and friend, as well as Renee Elise Goldsberry (Kate, Mike's wife), are all perfect and imbue their characters with the texture and dimension that is required. Daniel Sullivan has again succeeded in using his deft skills in directing his cast to perfection. I know it might be too early to do so, but I am

willing to stick my neck out to predict front runners come award season this year: *Good People* for best play, best actress for Frances McDormand, best supporting actress for Estelle Parsons and Becky Ann Baker, and Daniel Sullivan for direction. Kudos to everyone involved.

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