



IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR: (left to right) Linda Lavin & Dick Latessa in *The Lyons*. Photo: Carol Rosegg



*Theater Review*

# **Linda Lavin & cast roar in *The Lyons***

**THE LYONS**

**By Nicky Silver**

**Directed by Mark Brokaw**

**Cort Theatre**

**138 West 48<sup>th</sup> Street**

**(212) 239-6200, [www.TheLyonsBroadway.com](http://www.TheLyonsBroadway.com)**

**By David NouNou**

This is one of the extremely rare instances when opening a play at the very last minute enables it to remain in the minds of the Tony-nominating committee. This year, it has worked in favor of straight plays, but alas, not for the poor, misguided musicals that have opened recently. Having transferred from the Vineyard, Nicky Silver's *The Lyons* certainly ranks among the best of the year, as does Linda Lavin's performance.

Set in a New York City hospital, Rita Lyons (Ms. Lavin) is sitting at the bedside of her husband, Ben Lyons (Dick Latessa), who is dying of cancer. She is leafing through a magazine, trying to decide what color to paint the living room. Rita and Ben have known about the cancer for months but have not

color to paint the living room. Rita and Ben have known about the cancer for months but have not told their daughter, Lisa (Kate Jennings Grant), a divorcee with two children and a recovering alcoholic; or Curtis (Michael Esper), the gay son who writes short stories. The children have just been informed of their father's condition and that the end is near. As Rita says, "We didn't want to tell you because it would only upset you, and what could you have done about it?" This is the kind of family we are dealing with.

Despite the subject matter, Mr. Silver has written an engaging and extremely funny first act. It is an interesting play about the proverbial damaged family, but with a twist. The first act is hysterical and clever, and one cannot wait for Act II to begin and see where the show takes us. Thank goodness the original first scene of Act II (as mounted at the Vineyard Theatre last fall) has been deleted and now the second act begins with Curtis, the son looking at an apartment with a broker. This leads into further revelations about his flawed character.

Ultimately, the show is about abandonment and who is leaving whom first. Be it through death, divorce, imagined relationships, or just walking out and looking out for one's self, someone will walk and someone will be left behind. This is life.

Ms. Lavin's Rita is both the abandoned and the abandonee, and what she does with herself is the twist, and she is sheer perfection. From the tone in her voice to her body language, every movement or gesture speaks volumes. She has so perfected her craft as an actress that one just sits and relishes every eye roll, hand gesture, toss of the head, and stance. Mr. Latessa, a veteran of the stage, as Ben, plays it to the hilt in the most cantankerous of ways. He relishes insulting his family, and death would be a better existence than having to spend another day with them. Mr. Esper continues delivering interesting performances, and he is definitely a young actor to keep an eye on. Ms. Grant has matured in her role, has become comfortable in it, and delivers a solid performance.

Kudos to Mark Brokaw for his sharp direction, and heeding the advice of deleting the first scene in Act II from the Off-Broadway version. Thus, the play now has a more compact feel to it and delivers a stronger punch. *The Lyons* is one of the few gems in this overcrowded season of lackluster duds.

***Edited by Scott Harrah***

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