



'HONEYMOON MOTEL': (left to right) Ari Graynor & Steve Guttenberg in the Woody Allen one act, the final play in *Relatively Speaking*, a series of three plays by Ethan Coen, Elaine May, and Allen. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Relatively Speaking

disappointing, unfunny



RELATIVELY SPEAKING

Three one-act comedies by Ethan Coen, Elaine May & Woody Allen

Directed by John Turturro

Through January 12, 2012

Brooks Atkinson Theatre

256 West 47th Street

(877-250-2929), www.Relativelyspeakingbroadway

By David NouNou

What can one say when the comedy bar starts low and sinks lower with each progressive piece? What is most astonishing and mind-boggling is not just what is written, but who wrote them. Three one-act plays by three of America's most renowned playwrights and screenwriters, consisting of Ethan Coen, Elaine May and Woody Allen. Three formidable minds and geniuses serving nothing funny or unique but, instead sub-par Borscht Belt humor that went out in the 1950s. I have to wonder if any of them has seen an episode of "Modern Family," "30 Rock" or even a rerun of "Frasier" to see what brilliant contemporary comedy writing is about and that is for television.

Starting with "Talking Cure" by Ethan Coen, the tale is about an incarcerated postal worker, Larry (Danny Hoch) and his talks with his designated therapist (Jason Kravits) to decipher from where his aggression problems stem. They go about it with the talking cure method. After a few sessions, the set parts and we see Larry's parents shouting and arguing at the dinner table while he is still in the uterus. Who knew that this scene would ultimately be the best of the three and the shortest?

"George Is Dead" by Elaine May is a schizophrenic piece whose concept aims to be funny and ends ultimately pathetic. It is past midnight and Carla (Lisa Emory) has missed her husband's speech on Amnesty International and is trying desperately to call him and explain why she missed his speech. Who should arrive but Doreen (Marlo Thomas), a wealthy, self-absorbed, totally helpless human being whose husband George just died on the ski slopes of Aspen, and

she has no one to turn to but her nanny's daughter, a woman she has not seen in 40 years. Doreen refuses to take any action in the arrangements for her husband's funeral, in spite of all her money. Ms. Thomas's Doreen is incapable of making any responsible decisions; thus the onus falls on Carla and ultimately her mother, Nanny (Patricia O'Connell). Ms. Thomas looks great and acts the part of the self-absorbed woman/child to the hilt. It is a shame that the talented Ms. Emory has to play the straight foil.

The final play is Woody Allen's "Honeymoon Motel." In walks a man, Jerry (Steve Guttenberg) and a woman, Lisa (Ari Graynor), in formal wedding attire to the bridal suite of a seedy honeymoon motel, and we soon discover that they are not the newlyweds but that Jerry's stepson was to marry Lisa and Jerry stopped the wedding and ran off with the bride. Soon starts the mayhem, where everyone from the wedding party seems to know where to find this unholy duo: Jerry's best friend, Eddie (Grant Shaud), Lisa's parents (Julie Kavner and Mark-Linn Baker), Jerry's wife, Judy (Caroline Aaron). Even the rabbi, Richard Libertini, shows up; they all come and start squabbling about their past sordid affairs. It is up to the pizza delivery boy (Danny Hoch), a man who sorts everything up with his philosophical street-smart wisdom and sends all the intruders home a bit sadder but wiser.

The real gem here is Danny Hoch in the dual roles of Larry in the first scene and the pizza boy in the last. His comic timing and delivery in both is perfection. Marlo Thomas does an admirable job as the spoiled, pampered, vain Doreen. Her nanny, played by Patricia O'Connell, is quiet touching. As for the rest of the performances, they are broad and in the vein of a really bad sitcom.

It is sad to see that all these talented performers could not find more meaningful and funnier plays to be in, and what is even sadder is that these plays were actually written by geniuses. The humor, warmth and intelligence they brought to the screen, is a sorry rehashing of stale and insipid gags for the stage.

Published October 27, 2011

Reviewed at press performance on October 26, 2011

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