



**MASTER CLASS:** (left to right) Hamish Linklater, Alan Rickman, Lily Rabe (standing), Hettienne Park, & Jerry O'Connell (foreground) in *Seminar*. Photo: Jeremy Daniel



*Theater Review*

# Alan Rickman has 'write stuff' in *Seminar*

**SEMINAR**

By Theresa Rebeck

Directed by Sam Gold

Golden Theatre

252 West 45th Street

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

By Scott Harrah

Theresa Rebeck's *Seminar* is a story only struggling writers will truly appreciate. The one-act comedy-drama is primarily set in the spacious, rent-controlled Upper West Side apartment of an overeducated, wannabe writer Kate (Lily Rabe). Kate and three other recent Ivy League graduates hire cynical, sarcastic, private fiction-writing teacher and renowned literary icon Leonard (Alan Rickman) to help them pen their first novels and short stories. Although the story is not always engaging and lags at times, there are enough on-stage sparks to keep the paper-thin narrative from collapsing through its often-predictable twists and turns.

This is a writer's play that only those who studied fiction writing, journalism, and English and American literature at the university level will find intriguing. With endless references to Jack Kerouac and Jane Austen and the arduous quest to find one's true inner "voice" as a writer in the modern world, in which the characters complain that fiction is a dying art, *Seminar* is hardly a story for the nonliterary masses.

Few of the characters are exactly likable or evoke much sympathy from the audience. As Mr. Rickman's Leonard is quick to point out, the young writers he is teaching are whiny, spoiled, and privileged. In addition, Leonard comes across as an irascible, stubborn, cruel and bitter man who belittles his students incessantly, and that's quite a contrast to the upbeat, encouraging professors anyone who has taken a fiction-writing workshop may have encountered in college or graduate school.

The venerable Mr. Rickman, best known for his work in the Harry Potter movies, is shamelessly sexist as the vitriolic Leonard, often belittling Ms. Rabe's Kate for not being "a man" and reading too much Jane Austen and trying to copy the classic novelist's voice.

In addition, there are perplexing moments of gratuitous female nudity, and it is unclear what playwright Theresa Rebeck's point is here. In the play's beginning, Izzy (Hettienne Park) lifts up her blouse and flashes her breasts (for far too long) and for no apparent reason after she blathers on about wanting to be famous and make the cover of New York magazine. Is Ms. Rebeck trying to make some post-feminist statement about sexism? Or does she simply want to shock the audience? It is never made clear.

Despite the sometimes-flimsy and scattershot script, there are some outstanding performances here. Mr. Rickman is consistently caustic in all the right places, and he's the perfect anti-mentor to his self-indulgent students. When he launches into a tirade against his students, he is eerily menacing and dominates the stage with malevolent aplomb. Ms. Rabe, with her numerous emotional outbursts, gives a dynamic portrait of a woman fed up with her life and the futility of her writing.

One of the true standouts is Hamish Linklater as Martin, the frustrated, aspiring novelist who has romantic designs on Kate. Mr. Linklater's Martin is every geeky, naïve writer who is ravaged by low self-esteem and has little faith in his unpublished work.

Fine supporting performances are given by Jerry O'Connell as Douglas, a student who discovers some disturbing facts about Leonard's past; and Hettienne Park as Izzy, the sexually charged student who will do anything to make a name for herself as writer, despite her minimal talent. Sam Gold directs the cast with focus and precision, making everyone gel wonderfully and keeps a tight rein on them, ensuring that their performances remain natural and convincing at all times.

Playwright Theresa Rebeck is certainly prolific, and her plays can either be mediocre (*The Water's Edge*) or provocative (*The Scene* and *Mauritius*). *Seminar* is by no means her best work, but it provides a forum for superb acting and has volumes to say about what the lengths, no matter how unethical or questionable, young writers will resort to just to find ever-elusive success in the literary world.

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