



THE 'WRITE STUFF': John Lithgow as newspaper icon Joseph Alsop in *The Columnist*.
Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

The Columnist:

Era when WASPs ruled

THE COLUMNIST

Written by David Auburn

Directed by Daniel Sullivan

Through June 24, 2012

Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

261 West 47th Street

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

By David NouNou

With David Auburn's *The Columnist*, the official 2011-2012 theatrical season has come to an end. The theater season started with a whimper and ended with a thunderous thud, due to the horrific duds that opened in the last 10 days. *The Columnist* falls somewhere in between. If you are coming from seeing *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Ghost*, *Don't Dress For Dinner* or *Leap of Faith*, it is a step up. If you are coming from *Clybourne Park* or *One Man, Two Guvnors*, it is a step down. Although not compelling, one is never bored by this show.

What is most fascinating about this play is the way Mr. Auburn has captured the essence of a bygone era. The power and clout of a celebrated journalist (to clarify this point, writers who wrote their own material and influenced the public sentiment, and not TV personalities with pre-written scripts), the likes of Joseph Alsop, Walter Winchell, and even trashy gossip columnists such as Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons. People actually bought the papers to read what these people had to say and did not just push a button on a remote, a computer or a smartphone to get their info.

Joseph Alsop was an important figure in the 1950s and 1960s, commentating on politics and the Washington D.C. set. *The Columnist* reveals he was a great friend to John F. Kennedy and obtaining even more power and influence on Kennedy with the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam. However, once Kennedy was assassinated, Alsop's world and reign started collapsing around him.

Starting in 1954 with Alsop (John Lithgow) having a gay afternoon tryst in

Moscow with a KGB operative, Andrei (Brian J. Smith), this incident plagues Alsop until 1968, near the end of the play. In between these 14 years, he weds Susan Mary (Margaret Colin) in a marriage of convenience; after all, she is a widow with a teenage daughter, Abigail (Grace Gummer); his thorny relationship with his brother, Stewart (Boyd Gaines); and his nemesis and fellow journalist, Halberstam (Stephen Kunken). The scenes with all these assorted characters are done well, but they are just individual scenes, and there is no real flow of continuity. When you came out of Mr. Auburn's previous play *Proof*, your head was reeling with all the possibilities in that show. When you come out of *The Columnist*, you just feel, "It is...oh, okay."

The performances are uniformly good by all. Having first seen John Lithgow in his Tony Award-winning role as the Irish rugby player in 1973 in *The Changing Room*, Mr. Lithgow has certainly come a long way. Whether in the movies or on the stage, his characters have blown us away. It must not be easy being John Lithgow. We expect so much of him. His Alsop is a cross between Lawrence Jameson in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* and J.J. Hunsecker in *Sweet Smell of Success*. There is nothing new that Alsop possessed that Mr. Lithgow could bring to the character.

As Stewart Alsop, Boyd Gaines in smaller parts never ceases to delight; just thinking of his Bouley in *Driving Ms. Daisy* and Herbie in *Gypsy* brings a smile to the face. It proves the adage you can always add dimension to smaller roles, as does Stephen Kunken as Halberstam; he is forging a name for himself on the stage.

As for the women, their parts are ordinary fillers, but in the hands of Margret Colin and Grace Gummer, as mother and daughter, respectively, they imbue their characters with authenticity. I especially enjoyed the touching scene near the end of the play between Mr. Lithgow and Ms. Gummer; they were both immersed in their roles at that moment.

Not that *The Columnist* is not handsomely mounted and ably directed by Daniel Sullivan, for it surely is. It is just that the subject matter has passed its prime. Being gay and having a marriage of convenience is nothing new now in D.C. and Hollywood. It is commonplace. Had the play been written sometime from 1955 to 1965, this would have been a revelatory sensation. Now, however, you just shrug your shoulders and feel it is adequate.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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