



'THE SNOW GEESE': The cast of Sharr White's new drama. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

The Snow Geese never quite takes off

THE SNOW GEESE

Written by Sharr White

Directed by Daniel Sullivan

Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

261 West 47th Street

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

By Scott Harrah

Sharr White's *The Snow Geese* could have been a great Broadway vehicle for Mary-Louise Parker, fresh from her longtime run on Showtime's "Weeds," but unfortunately she's been handed a female lead role whose character is one of the show's least interesting. That speaks volumes about this half-baked attempt at Chekhovian-style dramatic angst. Although she isn't given much to work with, Ms. Parker always looks stunning in Jane Greenwood's dark gothic costumes.

Unlike the plays of Anton Chekhov, *The Snow Geese* is easy to follow, is never boring, but leaves us feeling empty. Playwright Sharr White covers far-too-familiar territory (family financial woes, sibling rivalry, and class elitism) in this World War I-era epic about a New York family, the Gaeslings, all gathering in a country lodge outside of Syracuse, NY on November 1, 1917.

If Mr. White wanted to use a silly Chekhovian title, perhaps *The Two Brothers Grimm* would be more suitable because the story is less about Ms. Parker's glamorous matriarch widow Elizabeth than the chronicles of her two sons. First, we have snooty, spoiled Princeton student Duncan (Evan Jonigkeit), the oldest, a guy who looks at going to war as an excuse to social climb. His more sensible younger brother, Arnold (Brian Cross), spends much of the show revealing the truth about the family.

There is also Elizabeth's religious sister, Clarissa Hohmann (Victoria White) and her German husband, Max (Danny Burstein); and Ukrainian maid Viktoriya (Jessica Love).

Everyone whines about his or her woes. Max has lost his successful physician practice because he's German, and with his thick Teutonic accent, his American neighbors see him as a threat (regardless of the fact that he's been in the States for decades) as war ravages Europe. (Note to Sharr White: Haven't we already seen a similar German character who is a doctor and ostracized by his community in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*?) Ms. Clark's Clarissa is more enigmatic and intriguing than her sister, but we never learn enough about her as to why, and for some reason she admires the piety of Viktoriya, who escaped the Soviet revolution in her faraway homeland.

Mr. White spends so much time detailing the reasons why the Gaeslings are unfortunate that the narrative often seems hokey and strained in an effort to be “Chekhovian,” never having enough authenticity or truth to make the characters believable or likeable.

Daniel Sullivan’s direction is well-paced considering the paper-thin material, and he gets decent performances from most of the cast. John Lee Beatty’s set is gorgeous, depicting an early 20th century country lodge and surrounding rural settings, complete with high-tech geese, all anchoring the story well.

However, the play would be more satisfying if Mr. White’s characters and the plot were more original and less like a tribute to Russian drama. If one is going mount an American stage epic, why is there a need to mimic foreign dramatists? Christopher Durang already lampooned this genre in last season’s Tony-winning *Vanya and Sonya and Masha and Spike*. Certainly people who lived on our shores nearly a century ago were more complex than what we see here. Ultimately, why bother with a fake Chekhov drama when there have been so many revivals of the real thing?

Edited by Scott Harrah

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