

Theater Review

Heights Players Find Ironies, Laughs in Simon's *Dinner Party*

By Phoebe Neidl

Musicals, comedies, dramas: They can all be seen this season with the Heights Players theater group in Brooklyn Heights as they kick off their 51st season with the usual ambition, variety and playfulness.

The Players chose the Neil Simon play, *The Dinner Party*, to begin what will hopefully be a second half-century of theater, and with a packed opening weekend, it proved a wise choice.

At a private room of an upscale Parisian restaurant, six people have been invited to a dinner party. As they arrive one by one, it becomes apparent that the guest list is actually composed of three divorced couples.

Sharp and enjoyable Simonesque banter arises from their desperate curiosity to find out who would devise such an event. But the culprit behind this charade does not appear until the second half of the play, when more heartfelt monologues are delivered by the six ex's trying to come to terms with their past relationships.

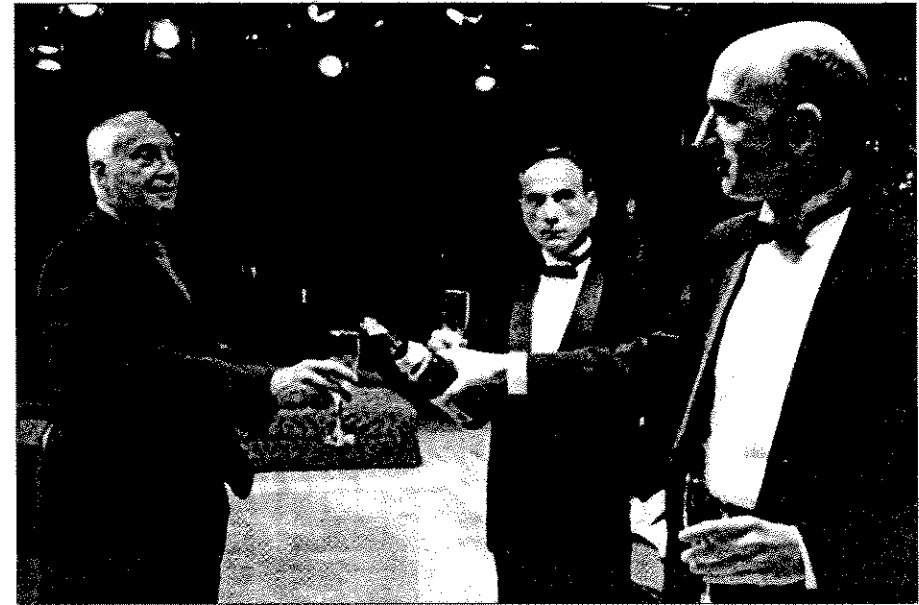
When Mariette, one of the divorcees

and a successful writer, played with an endearing neuroticism by Susan Faye Groberg, decides to leave the party before it turns into farce, she is answered by fellow guest Andre Bouville: "It's already farce. I think we're aiming for a much higher form of absurdity."

In his 31st play, first performed at the Music Box Theater in 2000, it seems Simon (himself married five times) insinuates that this "higher form of absurdity" is marriage itself. Of what is considered one of his more experimental plays, Simon said in interviews that he wanted to "break the concept that farces can never get real, even for a minute."

It is only when the last guest, Gabrielle Buonocelli, arrives, that the purpose of the bizarre evening is revealed. As ex-wife to Andre, a men's clothing tycoon played with a suitable blend of sarcasm and gravity by Ed Healy, the sexually charged and aggressive Gabrielle ushers the evening toward its crucial purpose.

As the second half of the play unfolds, the ironies of these three ruined relationships, and of marriage itself, emerge, as



Actors Ed Healy, Dennis Kent, and Steve Platt play three men who are first to arrive at a private dinner party in a Parisian restaurant and wonder why they have been invited and who will make up the remainder of the guest list, in the Heights Players' production of Neil Simon's *The Dinner Party*.

Photo by Gerry Newman

they discuss the kindest and cruelest things their partners did for them, which could sometimes be one and the same.

Mixing poignancy and silliness, heart-break with irreverence, the great balancing act demanded by this play is pulled off with the subtlety, skill and collaboration it requires of its ensemble. Dennis Kent is a welcome newcomer to the Heights Players, performing the role of Claude Pichon, the owner of a rare bookshop. His crisp, dry, well-timed delivery bounces between himself and the wide-eyed, naïve and quirky Albert, played by the perfectly cast Steve Platt, with the punch that would surely please the playwright.

Elizabeth Bove, who embodies Gabrielle with considerable presence, rounds out the cast with brilliant comic physicality, while Jill Lewis-Kelly plays the slinky blond ingenue, twice married to the lovable Albert.

Director Susan Montez has divided into two acts what was originally written as an intermissionless play, which complements the dual nature of this "melodrama."

No strangers to Simon's material, the Heights Players have performed many of

his award-winning plays in the past, including *Lost in Yonkers*, *California Suite*, *The Odd Couple*, and *Brighton Beach Memoirs*. The charming space of the Kaufmann auditorium in the old Willow Place Chapel is very suitable for Simon's many intimate, one-room plays.

Having begun as a theater troupe in 1956, the Heights Players found their permanent home on Willow Place in 1962 when they formed the Brooklyn Community Center along with the Brooklyn Heights Nursery School. It was later renamed the A.F. White Community Center after local philanthropist and housing reformer Alfred Tredway White who established the chapel in 1876.

The rest of the Heights Players' 2006-07 season will bring us nine plays, including classics such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Of Mice and Men*, and up next in October, *Ragtime*.

Show times for the Heights Players performances are Friday and Saturday at 8pm and Sundays at 2pm. For information on tickets and subscriptions, call 718-2237-2752.

Left to right:
Elizabeth Bove
Susan F. Groberg
Jill Lewis-Kelly

