

King's Theatre

The Mad hatters of Mad hattan

by John McLeod and Eric Simpson

If laughter is the measure of success for a comedy then the King's Theatre production of Neil Simon's *Prisoner of Second Avenue* was very successful. However other factors such as acting, direction, set design, props, sound and light also contribute to the success of a play. The King's Theatre production was competent in most of these areas.

The play is about a middle-aged advertising executive, Mel Edison, who is laid off from work and the effect this and the trauma of living in

New York has on him and his wife, Edna.

Greig Dymond played the role of Mel adequately in his first stage appearance. Equally good and, although it was not noticed, equally inexperienced, was Debbie James in the role of Edna Edison.

One of the problems in the play was the flow of compassion between Mel and Edna as they lived through their troubles. At times, the compassion was just not there. At the start of the play this may have been the fault of the acting and the direction. However, as Greg Dymond and Debbie James gained

confidence and control of their voices, it seemed that the problem was in Neil Simon's script. There were times when Edna was attentive and sympathetic to her husband's problems but the words were not words of compassion to a husband who was living through the disintegration of his world.

The play is set in the sixties with references to the song *Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head*, valium as the cure all, noise, crime and garbage in New York City and a total belief in the press' report that graham wafers cause cancer.

However, Tom Regan, the

director, chose to make some references to current times. The guest on David Hartman's *Good Morning America* was Margaret Trudeau, Carter was president and Hugh Carey was Governor of New York.

This was a questionable change because the play has the sixties in its script and only major changes would make it time consistent. Parts of the script deal with values and ideals of the sixties. The way in which Simon treats these values is consistent with the sixties and the references to the seventies added by the director detracted from the completeness

of the play.

However, Regan made a good choice when he decided to have the set against the wall of the theatre with the audience surrounding it. This arrangement brought the audience into the Edison apartment.

The scenes from outside of the apartment were all done from another stage that was almost in the audience. This detached the outside comment that Simon displayed in these scenes from the emotions inside the apartment.

The only problem with the set was that sometimes half the audience was behind the action and saw only the backs of the players. Also there were some problems with blockage when one player blocked the audience's view of another.

An imaginary balcony door provided many problems as Mel often walked through the glass door without opening it. The door provided other problems since at 2:30 in the morning the street was noisy but at rush hour there was no street noise.

There is a scene when Mel's brother and sisters, played by Susan MacLeod, Barb Sers, Paula Webber and Doug Bayers, come to see what they can do to help Mel. This part of the play seemed to drag since the scene continued after Simon had said all that was necessary. However, the roles were done well even though Doug Bayers missed a few lines.

When the apartment was robbed the thieves, one of whom was the new King's Student President, Frank Beazley, gave a good and humorous performance. However, one wonders why they left the piggy bank and fancy French phone but took the Fruit Loops cereal. Simon also does not explain how Mel can watch the T.V. after it is stolen.

In all, the play is an ambitious project that was produced well. You laugh at Mel and Edna but you also sympathize with their problems. The play ends in a classic American Gothic pose, Mel holding a snow shovel instead of a pitchfork, leaving one wondering if sanity has been restored to the *Prisoner of Second Avenue*.

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John Neville's direction was excellent as the play flowed faultlessly from one scene to another. Robert Doyle's set design and costumes created a tone for the characters that succeeded in conveying an authentic sense of pre-Revolutionary Russia.

The irony and humour of the play is never divorced from Chekov's serious condemnation of the human condition in a decaying society. This Neptune Theatre production may have failed to meld the serious dramatic and tragic feeling of the play with the wit and social humour but the result was nonetheless an uplifting and laudable performance.



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