

Friday  
May 31, 2013THE BERKELEY  DAILY PLANET

FRONT PAGE COLUMNISTS ARTS &amp; EVENTS THE WEEK FULL TEXT

## Arts &amp; Events

**New: “Abigail’s Party” at SF Playhouse—a Showcase of Talent in a Train-wreck of a Play**

by John A. McMullen II

Saturday June 08, 2013 - 10:57:00 AM



Kevin Berne

Rebekah Brockman and Jack Cutmore-Scott.

**“Abigail’s Party” at San**SHARE   

**Francisco Playhouse** has a delightful and comically adept cast of five, who together almost make a very amusing two acts, but the play keeps getting in the way. Mike Leigh’s comedy-drama is one those BBC sitcoms of a couple of decades ago with a twist—actually with a twisted twist, particularly the incongruous (and here unrevealed) resolution.

The set by Artistic Director Bill English is spot-on bourgeois and period perfection, and piques our hopes for a rousing evening of comedy.

It is set in the late 1970’s, and is about British middle-class aspirations. It was created from

improvisations with the actors, and also released to television. England’s Channel 4, an independent TV channel, reviewed it by writing, “*Abigail’s Party* still ranks as the most painful hundred minutes in British comedy-drama. Written with surgical precision and horribly well-performed, beneath the farcical exterior is a savage satire on England’s middle-class.” It is a comedy of manners without manners.

Producing Director Susi Damilano gives a stellar and sexy performance as Beverly, the hostess with the most-est—that is, with the most obnoxiously officious deportment imaginable. She is the pivot point and architect of the play since it’s her party to which she has invited three neighbors. She is holding the party with the excuse that the next-door teenager (the unseen Abigail) is having a party and Abigail’s mother Sue (Julia Brothers\*) needs refuge.

Beverly’s realtor husband Laurence (Remi Sandri\*) dashes in and out trying to do business and buy refreshments for the party while arguing with Beverly in front of the guests; he is similarly pretentious, aspiring to *culture élevée* and wanting to play a Beethoven LP for the party guests. Terse and surly ex-footballer Tony (Patrick Kelly Jones) and his giddy wife Angela (Allison Jean White\*) round out the guest list.

Overdressed Beverly, in a revealing emerald gown (which Ms. Damilano wears very well) enjoys quite a few minutes at the outset of the play dancing suggestively while putting out party snacks. It is the most entertaining moment of the play outside of her seductive dance with Tony while Tony’s wife Angela peeks voyeuristically over the magazine she pretends to read.

With nothing substantial to converse about, the refrain of “have another drink” motivates scenes from the worst party you’ve ever attended. It has definite shades of “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf?” with comic aspirations.

Julia Brothers’ demurely deadpan reactions of suppressed embarrassment draw the most laughs from the audience, and reflect those of self-respecting middle-class viewers everywhere. The audience gave an enthusiastic round of applause on a Tuesday night—surely to laud the talented cast, but perhaps to express a touch of gratitude that the pain had ended.

Under the sure direction of Amy Glazer, and through it all, the comic talents of the ensemble are patently obvious, but deserve a better piece to wrap their talents around. Truly, I can’t imagine this piece being done any better than this production.

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Look forward to the next offering of “Camelot” in July by this exceptional theatre company. If last season’s award-winning “My Fair Lady” (seven Critics Circle awards!) is an indicator of their ability with musicals, it will be a not-to-be-missed revival.

(\*Member, Actor’s Equity Association)