



'Abigail's Party' review: Fine diversion

Robert Hurwitz

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Susi Damilano (left) plays Bev, a hostess trying to impress guests Angela (Allison Jean White) and Sue (Julia Brothers) with her upward mobility in "Abigail's Party," written by Mike Leigh. Photo: Jessica Palopoli



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Abigail's Party: Comedy. By Mike Leigh.

Directed by Amy Glazer. Through July 6. San Francisco Playhouse, 450 Post St., S.F. Two hours. \$30-\$100. (415) 677-9596. www.sfplayhouse.org.

Abigail isn't at the party in "Abigail's Party," an entertaining but ephemeral Mike Leigh play from 1977 that opened Saturday at San Francisco Playhouse. Abigail, 15, is having her own party, raucous enough to be heard at the one to which her worried mother, Sue, has been banished a few doors down the block.

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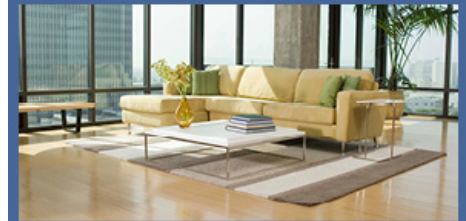
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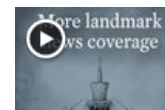
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Bev's party, the one we're attending, is less high-spirited - despite the aggressive party-hearty efforts of the hostess. Bev (Susi Damilano) has set up a little gathering to welcome new neighbors Angela (Allison Jean White), a nurse, and her hunky husband, Tony (Patrick Kelly Jones). Or because she wants to get into Tony's pants. Or as part of her marital warfare with her overworked and pretentious husband, Laurence (Remi Sandri), a real estate agent.

It's also a chance to lord it over Sue (Julia Brothers), the mousey neighbor whose architect husband left her for a younger woman. As with most of Leigh's plays (and films), class divisions come with the territory. Sue is old-school upper middle class. The overtly, ineptly social-climbing Bev and Laurence have made it into this London neighborhood, and he resents the lower-caste newcomers following suit.

None of this cuts very deep in a play Leigh and his actors threw together in a hurry to fill an unexpected hole in a theater's schedule (and made into a TV film to fill a similar sudden cancellation at the BBC). But if the action hasn't the multilayered bittersweetness of Leigh's best work and none of the characters is as fully drawn, "Abigail" has proved one of his most popular plays, to Leigh's oft-stated surprise. Chalk it up to the sharp comedy of familiar people acting badly or awkwardly in a familiar situation.

It's also a seemingly irresistible showcase for good actors, and for set designers like Bill English, whose spacious, ostentatiously furnished living room is a symphony in questionable '70s conspicuous consumption. As smartly staged by Amy Glazer, the sarcastic gibes and comic improprieties gather as thick as the cigarette and cigar smoke and flow almost as copiously as the gin, ale and other beverages consumed.

White's Angela grows delightfully tipsier, capping her cluelessness with a hilarious free-form hippie dance. Brothers' Sue, who keeps trying to turn down refills, is a transparent screen of worries about her daughter's party and discomfort at allusions to it and her single state. Sandri's host Laurence gets more obnoxious in trying to show off his higher cultural tastes - for van Gogh, Beethoven and his leather-bound Dickens - and testier in reacting to his wife's barbs and her salivating over Jones' terse, antisocial but susceptible Tony.

Damilano takes the showcase role of Bev and runs with it, owning the stage with hostess-from-hell insistence, regardless of her guests' wishes, and suggestive dancing in a slinky green gown (the period choreography is by Kimberly Richards). It's a diverting two hours for anyone who's ever been stuck in a bad party, and thin enough that you won't remember it nearly as long.

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