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## Actors put some life in SF Playhouse's *Party*

[Chad Jones](#) [1 comment](#) [Amy Glazer](#), [Julia Brothers](#), [local theater](#), [plays](#), [Remi Sandri](#), [SF Playhouse](#), [Susi Damilano](#), [theater review](#)

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*Light my fire: Bev (Susi Damilano, far left) and Tony (Patrick Kelly Jones) grind into some dirty dancing, while Laurence (Remi Sandri, center) and Sue (Julia Brothers) keep things a little more polite in the San Francisco Playhouse production of Mike Leigh's Abigail's Party. Below: the revelers of Abigail's Party, from left, Allison Jean White, Jones, Brothers, Damilano and Sandri. Photos by Jessica Palopoli*

If you've seen a **Mike Leigh** movie, the conversational rhythms and that true-to-life quality of nothing happening/everything happening will seem familiar on stage in *Abigail's Party*, a play Leigh devised in 1978 with the help of his actors (Leigh is famous for improvising scripts). Though not nearly as substantial or illuminating as some of Leigh's best movies – *Life Is Sweet*, *Secrets and Lies*, *Another Year* – *Abigail's Party* has some delightful gin-soaked moments as an older couple and a younger couple mix it up *Virginia Woolf*-style under the wary (and woozy) eye of a neighbor who would probably rather be anywhere but this party.

At **San Francisco Playhouse**, director **Amy Glazer** and her quintet of actors is working wonders with the subtext in Leigh's script, finding laughs that perhaps Leigh never even knew about. There's a manic energy to

this two-hour production that intensifies with each gin and tonic (for the ladies) or rum and Coke (for the nearly monosyllabic gentleman) or whiskey (for the host). While this can be very entertaining, especially each time the hostess grabs an empty (or nearly empty) glass from someone's hand and gives them a "little top-up" whether they want it or not, it's also a little unsettling, which is as it should be.

We're on Richmond Road in a London suburb. As designed by **Bill English**, the living room/dining room/kitchen set evokes the late '70s so perfectly you may feel time travel really is possible.

Beverly (**Susi Damilano**) and Laurence (**Remi Sandri**) are hosting a little neighborhood soiree. Their guests are the new couple in the 'hood, Angela (**Allison Jean White**) and Patrick Kelly Jones), and Sue (**Julia Brothers**), whose teenage daughter is having a rowdy party a few houses down where mom is distinctly unwelcome. With her blond hair in a Farrah-like flip and a bright green dress cut down to here (terrific costumes are by **Tatjana Genser**), Bev is raring for a good time. Laurence is preoccupied with work, and poor Sue, an uncomfortable divorcee, is worried about her daughter (the unseen Abigail of the title), her home and her ability to withstand an evening with her neighbors.



Sweet-natured, gabby Angela is game for anything and never minds Bev's constant "topping-up" of her G&T, while Tony grunts an occasional word and makes no move to dissuade Bev from her flagrant flirtation with him. Laurence can't help but notice the devouring looks being shared between Tony and his wife, and rather than address the situation directly, he reacts in passive-aggressive, wounded-ego ways that only intensify his indigestion.

The party is all fun and games for a while as the booze flows, the cigarettes turn to ash and social formalities begin disintegrating.

The entire cast is wonderful, but Brothers all but steals the show as practically silent Sue. Brothers can say more with a look than anyone else on stage, and she's brilliant at conveying British reserve and good manners underscored by fear, loathing and utter disgust. It would be hard to tear your eyes away from Brothers if White weren't so wonderful as Angela. Her accent is spot on, and though Angela can be annoying (you begin to understand why her husband is such a withdrawn caveman), she's well intentioned and harmless – and in White's capable hands, hilarious.

When the play decides to veer in a dramatic direction, it goes there in a hurry, and the inevitable hangover the

next morning arrives early...and hammers hard. Director Glazer has modulated her production in such a way that the shift in tone isn't a complete surprise. There are dark, serious currents to even the most frivolous scenes early on (Damilano is especially good conveying the nasty edge to the comedy), so when this party is over, you feel like the revelers are actually getting the evening they deserve.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* continues through July 6 at the San Francisco Playhouse, 450 Post St., San Francisco. Tickets are \$30-\$100. Call 415-677-9596 or visit [www.sfplayhouse.org](http://www.sfplayhouse.org).

## One comment



1. Bill English / [June 7, 2013](#)

Thanks, Chad! And for the kudos on the set. Time travel is possible but maybe to an era with better taste. That wallpaper. Oy vey!

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