

Post Mortem on A.R. Gurney

By David C. Nichols

AMONG JANUARY'S THEATRICAL HIGHLIGHTS is the West Coast premiere of *Post Mortem* at the Lyric Hyperion Theatre Café. This satirical fantasy by A.R. Gurney, that most perspicacious and prolific of American playwrights—*The Dining Room*, *The Cocktail Hour*, *Sylvia*, *Love Letters*, ad infinitum—posits a not-so-distant totalitarian American future, a theme he has explored in many a recent work.

At a “faith-based” college in 2015, a nervy student seeking to impress his drama teacher uncovers the titular “lost play” written by one A.R. Gurney, here long dead under extremely suspicious circumstances rumored to involve Dick Cheney. Directed by longtime Gurney colleague Jared Barclay, *Post Mortem* comes to the Lyric via the international touring company Insight America, for whom Gurney partially rewrote the play, as is his wont.

often at New York's acclaimed Flea Theatre in SoHo, which he calls “extremely hospitable. They make it really easy to do politically themed work.”

Such as *O, Jerusalem*, his futuristic play that deals with the political events leading up to 9/11/2001. “I wanted to say a few things that one couldn't say at the time,” Gurney recalls. As in *Mrs. Farnsworth*, whose title character pens a book about an inept president clearly based on a certain Crawford, TX resident. Or *Screen Play*, in which Gurney recast *Casablanca* in Buffalo (Gurney's hometown) as Americans struggle and scheme to cross the border into Canada. As Gurney admits, “It's fun to satirize the present.”

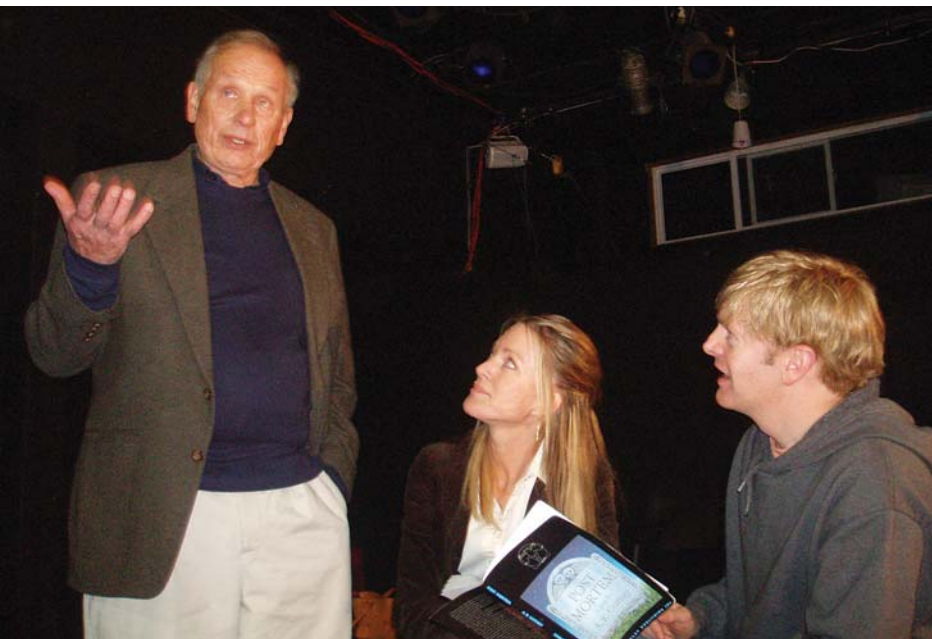
Coming up next for Gurney is a remounting of *Buffalo Gal* in the fall 2008 at New York's Primary Stages. Previously produced at Williamstown with Mariette Hartley and at Buffalo's Studio Arena Theatre with Betty Buckley, *Buffalo Gal* follows Amanda, a television star down on her luck and her return to Buffalo to play Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard*.

As Gurney sees it, “The movies used to be a celebrated event. People would amass for a major motion picture, road shows, and those fabulous movie palaces. It was a major occurrence. Today, the mystique is no longer there, not when you can get a movie in the mail and pop it in your DVD player in your own home. The human contact, that indefinable relationship between the actors and the script and the audience, is what makes the theatre essential. When you go to a play, you see a more pronounced reality, or an aspect of reality. The audience enters that reality. They are necessary to the event. There's something elemental about that, unique to the stage.”

Gurney continues. “I've been on stage. When you feel lousy, and want to feel better, there's nothing like Dr. Greasepaint.” He cites Elizabeth Taylor in *Love Letters* opposite James Earl Jones in December 2007 for her annual AIDS fundraiser in the theatre on the Paramount lot. “This is a movie star, a cinema legend, that's how we know her. Not a creature of the stage. And she has not been very well. She was in a wheelchair, very hesitant at the beginning.

“I sat up front, Holland Taylor on one side, Swozie Kurtz on the other, and it was the most remarkable thing. You literally saw this woman grow in assurance from the audience's response. She gained in authority with each successive scene, soaking up the laughter, the audience's energy. She was magnificent. At the end, the audience stood up, and Elizabeth got up from that wheelchair, she just stands up by herself, acknowledging the audience.

“That's the power of the stage, that unspoken communication. There are moments when it all just blooms. And when it does, it's wonderful. Unforgettable.” ■



MICHAEL SPELLMAN

A.R. Gurney with actors Anna Nicholas and Alan Becker

“This is the first time I've specifically referenced myself,” says the 77-years-young Gurney, affably acerbic as ever. “Of course, I've referenced aspects of my life, my milieu, for years. This was more deliberate, in the face of the solipsistic nature of the Bush administration.

“The title is a double-entendre, a post mortem on the 'late A.R. Gurney' and on what has happened to America. The play-within-the-play turns out to be one of those plays like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or the *Oresteia*, that history finds world-changing.”

The devolution of Western culture is a topic increasingly mined by Gurney in recent years,

POST MORTEM

Previews Jan. 9-10
Opens Jan. 11;
plays Fri.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 3 pm; through Feb. 17
Tickets: \$20
The Lyric-Hyperion
Theater Café
2106 Hyperion Ave.
Los Angeles
800.595.4849 or www.tix.com