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ENTERTAINMENT & CULTURE

REVIEW: THEATER by *Terry Teachout*

Charming to a Fault

San Diego

THEATRICAL MANNERS have changed greatly in the half century since “The Pleasure of His Company” opened on Broadway. Nowadays it’s an insult to call a play “well made,” but back then you could still get away with setting a neatly crafted boulevard comedy in the drawing room of a home whose owners employed a butler. Not only did “The Pleasure of His Company” run for 474 performances, but it was later turned into a Hollywood movie that did just as well at the box office. Today, though, well-made comedies are as dead as drawing rooms, and the Old Globe’s revival of “The Pleasure of His Company” is the first time that the play has been on stage anywhere since the original production closed in 1959.

To what do we attribute this act of dramatic archaeology? The credit goes to Darko Tresnjak, the Old Globe’s resident artistic director, who has a taste for American stage comedies of the

’50s that you wouldn’t expect from a director born in Yugoslavia. “I find that underneath the glossy surfaces, the subtext [of these plays] is actually quite subversive,” he told James Hebert of the San Diego Union-Tribune earlier

THE OLD GLOBE

1549 El Prado, Balboa Park,
San Diego, 619-234-5623

THE PLEASURE OF HIS COMPANY

Old Globe Theatre (\$42-\$64),
closes Aug. 10

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

Lowell Davies Festival Theatre
(\$29-\$64), closes Sept. 28

this month. Last year Mr. Tresnjak revived John van Druten’s “Bell, Book and Candle,” a quintessential example of the genre. Alas, I didn’t see that production, but if it was half as stylish as this one, it must have been terrific.

“The Pleasure of His Company” is jointly credited to Cornelia Otis Skinner, a once-popular stage comedienne who starred in the original Broadway production, and Samuel Taylor, a now-forgotten commercial playwright best

known for his work on the screenplays of Billy Wilder’s “Sabrina” (which was adapted from “Sabrina Fair,” one of Taylor’s Broadway hits) and Alfred Hitchcock’s “Vertigo.” Like “Sabrina,” “The Pleasure of His Company” is a fluffy romantic comedy set in the upper tier of high society, but it has a significantly sharper bite than its fairy-tale predecessor, enough to draw the occasional drop of blood.

Biddeford “Pogo” Poole (Patrick Page), the star of “The Pleasure of His Company,” is an ascot-wearing socialite-sportsman who walked out on Katharine (Ellen Karas), his ex-wife, and Jessica (Erin Chambers), his only daughter, to become (in Katharine’s exasperated phrase) a “globetrotting heel.” Years later he shows up on Katharine’s doorstep just in time for Jessica’s wedding, determined to charm his way into Jessica’s heart—and, if possible, Katharine’s bed. That Katharine has married again, this time to a rich, dull San Francisco businessman (Jim Abele), means nothing to Pogo, who uses his charm as an offensive weapon and is in the habit of having his own way, no matter what it costs or whom it hurts.

The part of Pogo was created on Broadway by Cyril Ritchard and played

on screen by Fred Astaire, which will give you a pretty good idea of what it takes to make “The Pleasure of His Company” fly. (This is the sort of play in which lines like “I dug out some of the ancestral bourbon” and “Morality is merely low blood pressure” are tossed off between drinks.) The good news is that Mr. Tresnjak and the Old Globe have got every bit of what it takes. Not only does Mr. Page waltz through his part with the utmost suppleness and urbanity, but his supporting cast keeps him all the way up on his toes, and the immaculately classy set and costumes of Alexander Dodge and Fabio Toblini are suitable to the highest possible degree. Even the butler, Sab Shimon, earns his share of the laughter. As for the play itself, I didn’t buy the denouement—Pogo gets off way too easy—but the wit flows so freely en route to the finish line that you’ll barely notice.

A number of New York companies, most of them Off Broadway, have lately been taking note of the possibilities of the well-made boulevard comedy. S.N. Behrman’s “Biography,” Rachel Crothers’s “Susan and God” and John van Druten’s “Old Acquaintance” were all revived to fine effect in the past couple of seasons, and Mr. Tresnjak’s San Diego production of “The Pleasure of His Company” belongs among their number. While such plays may be low on fiber, no theatrical diet can claim to be balanced without an occasional helping of dessert, and “The Pleasure of His Company” is as airy and tasty as a chocolate soufflé.

Mr. Teachout, the Journal’s drama critic, blogs about theater and the other arts at www.terryteachout.com. Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.



Ellen Karas, Erin Chambers and Patrick Page in “The Pleasure of His Company.”