

The New York Times

Ready for Her Close-Up, Again, Again, Again



BY AN ADRIANO GEMELLI

When Lady Gaga finished her dumping, raring, razz-dazzle song-and-dance number at Radio City Music Hall on Wednesday night, she held her pose and kept the stage lights on, delighting

her many camera-wielding fans. Her Monster Ball tour always provided something worth a snapshot: a sci-fi tableau, perhaps, or a skimpy, gilly costume. The more her image gets around, the better Lady Gaga does. "Take my picture!" she urged the audience, in her first of four sold-out shows at Radio City. "I want to be a star!" She is. A combination of well-planned outreach, media exposure and catchy, stuttering choruses — "pa-pa-pa-pa-papapapap," "p-p-p-poker face" —

has made Lady Gaga a multimillion-selling, Grammy-nominated star in less than a year and a half since the 2008 release of her debut album, "The Fame" (Stax/Intune/Konive/Cherrytree/Interscope). She and Joanne Angelino Germanotta, a.k.a. Lady Gaga, sings, writes, dresses and apparently exists to toy with celebrity as performance art, seeing how freaky (in a fascinating way) she can be as she reaches a mass audience.

While showpeople like David Bowie and Madonna established this career path, Lady Gaga is strutting along it with larger-than-life style and, brim- ing, actual musical gifts. Her voice is strong enough to expose in a cappella singing, and she backed herself up with her own piano playing, sounding like female Elton John when she played a rickety "Spacelicious" wearing a dug black-feather shawl.

Her opening acts reflected her two main source genres: R&B from Jaso Derilla and glam-rock from Seal's Precious Weapons. Lady Gaga's songs, so full, most often pumped up by her Eurodisco beats. Between snappy choruses — "Just dance" or "Catch a bad romance" — her verses sometimes reveal in desire, sometimes quip from it. Never sons on "The Fame"

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SARA ERNA WITH THE NEW YORK TIMES
Present Laughter, with Victor Garber and Lisa Banes, in the Noël Coward play at the American Airlines Theater.

Shades of Coward, Robed in Silk And Self-Devotion

Should Bergdorf Goodman experience a sudden run on velvet smoking jackets and silk pajamas, blame Victor Garber, the debonair star of the Roundabout Theater Company revival of "Present Laughter," Noël Coward's valentine to the mad-dancing, marvelous world of the theater and to his own mad-dancing, marvelous self.

In this frothy production, which opened Thursday night at the American Airlines Theater, the stage stalwart Mr. Garber, who has lately traded the boards for a checkbook-swelling stay in Hollywood, eases back onto Broadway as if slipping into a bubble bath. Champagne coupe in hand, as a vehicle for former smitten idols on the wrong side of 40, "Present Laughter" is ideal, a piercing vintage Daimler that simply requires a magnetic actor of finely honed comic gifts to work its considerable charms. Mr. Garber fits the

role as neatly as those silk pajamas fit him.

The central character, Garry Essendine, the sun around whom the play's various characters circle in wobbly orbit, is a West End star of the 1930s for whom the footlights truly never dim. To emerge from the bedroom for a cup of coffee is to make an entrance, and every-day conversation quickly rises to histrionic heights that leave amateurs gasping for air.

In the first act, after rising at the crack of noon, Garry swans down the swirling Deco staircase (what else?) of his sumptuous flat to play a turbulent love scene. (Alexander Dodge's eye-popping set is a bit of a scene stealer itself.) Daphne Stillington (Holley Fain), the star-struck young lady who so unfortunately forgot her hat when the evening began, requiring her to bunk down in Garry's spare room, refuses to depart before the proper romantic passes are struck. So Garry must go into his dance with-

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Desperate Father's Plea To a Detached Scientist

"Extraordinary Measures," a movie about a medical breakthrough, is not especially eager to break new ground of its own. Directed with care and competence by Tom Vaughan ("What Happens in Vegas"), the film hews closely to familiar themes and patterns.

One strand is a drama about a family in crisis, with parents facing the illness and possible death of two of their children, who suffer from a fatal genetic disorder. Another piece is a buddy picture, in which a mismatched pair of guys — one earnest and emotive (Brendan Fraser), the other gruff and solitary (Harrison Ford) — set off on an unlikely adventure, hoping to find a cure.

But also, and more unusually, the film, adapted by Robert Nelson Jacobs from a nonfiction book by the journalist Geeta Anand, is an examination of how medical research is conducted and financed. This is the main reason that "Extraordinary Measures," the first feature released by CBS Films, rises above some of its made-for-TV trappings. (The presence of es-



BY CHARLES WHELAN FOR THE TIMES
Extraordinary Measures Harrison Ford stars in this medical drama, opening on Friday nationwide.

Established big-screen stars doesn't hurt either.)

The storytelling and the visual style are rarely more than workmanlike, and the big scenes arrive punctually and are played with minimal nuance. But the dogged, unflinching presentation of emotionally charged, complicated material works to the film's advantage. The lump-in-the-throat elements take care of themselves — the sight of sweet and lively children in hospital beds has a way of opening up audience tear ducts, even without

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PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL O'NEILL

DANCE REVIEW 2 City Ballet's Russian program ("Lady With the Little Dog," above).

FILM REVIEW 9 "Creation," Jon Amiel's portrait of Charles Darwin.

It's Still Mostly Sunny at Hartfield

There can be too much of a good thing, but a great thing can be remade over and over. Austen's "Pride and Prejudice," "The Importance of Being Earnest" and "Star Trek," there is, of course, "Emma."

Jane Austen's most charming novel (or second most charming, it's an endless debate) returns to television on Sunday in a new BBC mini-series on PBS. This version is faithful to the book — with enough verve and confidence to flesh out minor characters and improvise scenes.

Remain Great ("Atonement") is irresistible as the willful, wrongheaded matchmaker Emma Woodhouse, all but eclipsing her many predecessors in the role. And Michael Gambon ("Harry Potter," "Cranford") is just as distinctive as Emma's fretful, draft-fearing father. The casting of the lead is critical, but some of



ROMOLA GARAI

Emma, the latest PBS "Masterpiece" mini-series, stars Romola Garai as Jane Austen's willful matchmaker.

the most memorable Emma's owe it of their success to secondary characters. Mr. Garson does not disappoint. It may seem way too soon for yet another Austen mini-series. "Masterpiece," as the classics department at PBS now calls itself, has all but eclipsed the 19th-century literary canon, prolonging the lesser works of Eliza Gaskell. Part 2 of "Return to Cranford" ended earlier this month.

In 2008 "Masterpiece" began a ruckus. "The Complete Jane Austen" series "Emma," two other adaptations: her novels, "Northanger Abbey" a "Persuasion," will be rerun in Feb. Strict constructionists and followers fan Web site, The Republic of Pemberley.com, are still ruckus from the license taken in the Keira Knightley 2005 movie version of "I and Prejudice." But there hasn't b-

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JANUARY 22, 2010

WEEKEND Arts

MOVIES
PERFORMANCES

Shades of Coward, Robed in Silk And Self-Devotion

Should Bergdorf Goodman experience a sudden run on velvet smoking jackets and silk pajamas, blame Victor Garber, the debonair star of the Roundabout Theater

**CHARLES
ISHERWOOD**

**THEATER
REVIEW**

Company revival of

“Present Laughter,” Noël Coward’s valentine to the maddening, marvelous world of the theater and to his own maddening, marvelous self.

In this frothy production, which opened Thursday night at the American Airlines Theater, the stage stalwart Mr. Garber, who has lately traded the boards for a checkbook-swelling stay in Hollywood, eases back onto Broadway as if slipping into a bubble bath, Champagne coupe in hand. As a vehicle for former matinee idols on the wrong side of 40, “Present Laughter” is ideal, a purring vintage Daimler that simply requires a magnetic actor of finely honed comic gifts to work its considerable charms. Mr. Garber fits the role as neatly as those silk pajamas fit him.

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Dodge’s eye-popping set is a bit of a scene stealer itself.) Daphne Stillington (Holley Fain), the star-struck young lady who so unfortunately forgot her latchkey the evening before, requiring her to bunk down in Garry’s spare room, refuses to depart before the proper romantic poses are struck. So Garry must go into his dance without any rehearsal, dispensing disillusion with the grace of a lover presenting a dozen roses to his sweetheart.

“Listen, my dear,” he softly but firmly intones. “It isn’t that I don’t love you.” Brief, tender pause. “I do.” Still more tender pause. “I knew it the first moment that I took you in my arms last night.”

Just as Daphne melts into a swoon, the ardor dries up as Garry introduces notes of nobility and self-sacrifice. “But I am not free like other men, to take happiness when it comes to them,” he says wistfully. “I belong to the public and my work.” Sob!

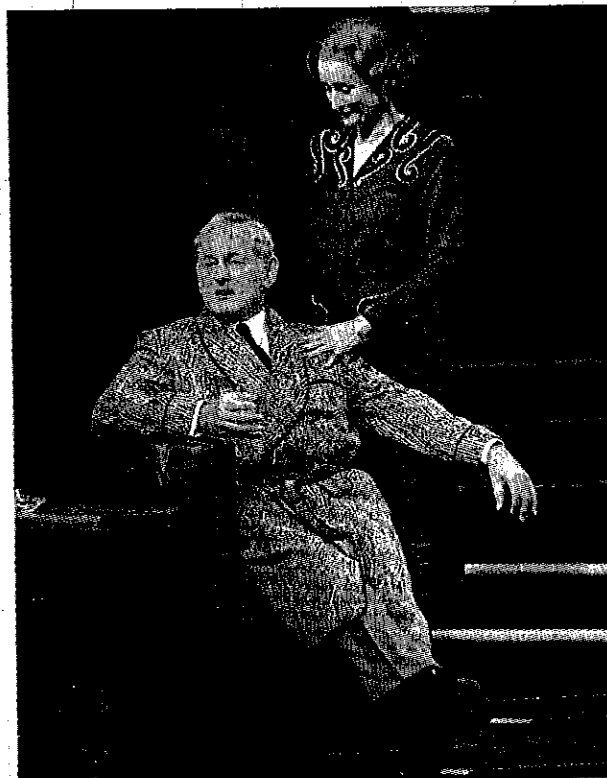
Garry, who knows his audience as he knows every incipient wrinkle on his forehead, is quickly unencumbered of Miss Stillington, this morning’s problem, but a host of other torments are soon assailing him. His assistant, Monica Reed, played with her usual cackling acidity by Harriet Harris, has piles of imploring mail from besotted fans he has charmed with the wave of a hand. His wife, Liz (an amiably wry Lisa Banes), whose aid is enlisted in ushering the teary Daphne to the door, has grown tired of Garry’s romantic nonsense and

urges him to grow up. (They have long since parted as bed partners but are fast friends and colleagues.)

And some real trouble is brewing: a possible affair between one of Garry’s steadfast associates, Morris Dixon (Marc Vietor), and the femme fatale married to his producer, Henry Lyppiatt (Richard Poe). The sudden arrival of

Roland Maule (Brooks Ashman-skas), an eccentric young playwright whom Garry has inadvertently encouraged, threatens to upend the day entirely, making plans for the impending six-week tour of Africa that much harder to complete.

These complications are interesting only insofar as they inspire tirades of petulant self-pity, waspish anger and antic anxiety



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Present Laughter, with Victor Garber and Lisa Banes, in the Noël Coward play at the American Airlines Theater.

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

on the part of Garry, all delivered in the kind of crisp, wit-laced, elegant dialogue for which we still treasure Coward, who wrote the role (in 1939) as an affectionate send-up of himself and played it on tour in 1942 and subsequently in London and America. (Previous Broadway incarnations have starred Clifton Webb, George C. Scott and most recently Frank Langella.)

ONLINE: 'PRESENT LAUGHTER'

↖ An interview with Victor Garber, the original 1946 review in *The New York Times* and past coverage of Noël Coward:

nytimes.com/theater

Mr. Garber surfs these heady waters with lithe dexterity. An impeccable English accent allows him to alter the rhythms and cadences of Garry's outbursts to maximum comic effect. As Garry moves effortlessly



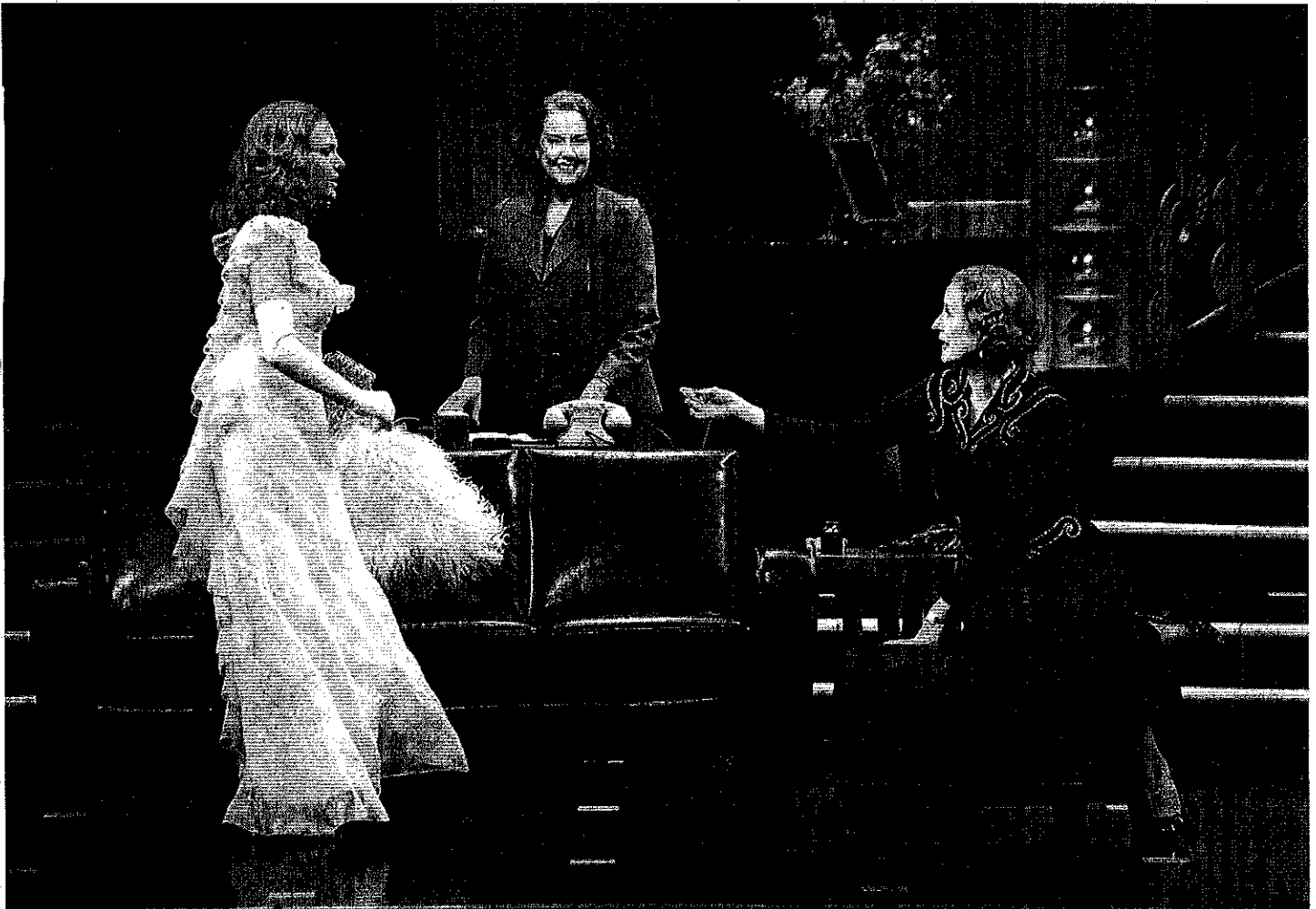
Suave in silk: Victor Garber.

from role to role — from the paternal lover to the cross but affectionate boss to the prickly husband — Mr. Garber makes subtly clear the delight he takes in playing each to the hilt.

"I'm always acting," he says,

in tones of mystified agony. "Watching myself go by — that's what so horrible." Mr. Garber makes us aware that for a man of innately theatrical temperament, this horror is definitely honey-dipped. The half-dozen parts Garry will be playing in rep in Africa are nothing compared with the dozens he performs for friends and associates every day, and he takes justifiable pride in the professionalism with which he tackles each one.

The imperious commanding officer of his small retinue of associates, Garry is also the temperamental child they are all expected to mind. And Mr. Garber's still boyish good looks bring out the vestiges of innocent play beneath the temper tantrums. When Garry finds himself suddenly left alone in the play's third act, amid the empty Champagne glasses and the limp streamers of his farewell party, Mr. Garber looks like a child whose toys have been mysteriously taken away.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

From left, Holley Fain, Harriet Harris and Lisa Banes in the Roundabout Theater Company production of "Present Laughter."

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

The director, Nicholas Martin, who staged the play for the Huntington Theater Company in Boston in 2007, with Mr. Garber heading much the same cast, whips the farcical second act to fine peaks of dizzy fun. Mr. Ashmanskas gives a flamboyant, crowd-coddling performance as the antic playwright Roland, scampering about the stage like a

Present Laughter

By Noël Coward; directed by Nicholas Martin; sets by Alexander Dodge; costumes by Jane Greenwood; lighting by Rui Rita; sound by Drew Levy; hair and wig design by Tom Watson; dialect coach, Deborah Hecht; production stage manager, Stephen M. Kaus; production manager, Aurora Productions; general manager, Rebecca Habel; associate artistic director, Scott Ellis. Presented by the Roundabout Theater Company, Todd Haines, artistic director; Harold Wolpert, managing director; Julia C. Levy, executive director. At the American Airlines Theater, 227 West 42nd Street, Manhattan; (212) 719-1300. Through March 21. Running time: 2 hours 30 minutes.

WITH: Victor Garber (Garry Essendine), Brooks Ashmanskas (Roland Maule), Lisa Banes (Liz Essendine), Nancy E. Carroll (Miss Erikson), Alice Duffy (Lady Saltburn), Holley Fain (Daphne Stillington), Pamela Jane Gray (Joanna Lyppiatt), James Joseph O'Neil (Fred), Richard Poe (Henry Lyppiatt), Marc Vietor (Morris Dixon) and Harriet Harris (Monica Reed).

rabid squirrel. (This role seems to invite outlandish interpretations; in the last Broadway revival Tim Hopper stripped naked.) As the seductress who confesses that the prey she has always been hunting is Garry himself, Pamela Jane Gray is a trifle glassy and arch, as if holding onto her British accent for dear life. But for the most part the supporting cast provides a solid trampoline for Mr. Garber to bounce off.

In today's culture, celebrity increasingly looks to be about as much fun as a lifelong trip to the dentist. "Present Laughter" whisks us back to a more innocent past, when the trials of fame could still be negotiated with grace and style. In the glittery aerie in which Garry Essendine abides, after all, even the stalkers of the stars are well-bred, well-spoken and well-dressed. And there are no paparazzi in sight.

Roundabout finds the fizz in 'Present Laughter'

By MICHAEL KUCHWARA, AP Drama Critic

January 22, 2010

NEW YORK, (AP) --It's not easy maintaining the fizz in the frenzy known as "Present Laughter," Noel Coward's delightfully frantic comedy about a narcissistic actor and the chaos that inevitably erupts in his posh London household.

But director Nicholas Martin manages to keep the bubbles from bursting in the Roundabout Theatre Company's effervescent revival that opened Thursday at Broadway's American Airlines Theatre. Much of the credit goes to his debonair leading man, Victor Garber, who looks totally at home in a spiffy dressing-gown and silk pajamas. But then the man has the requisite matinee-idol profile to play Garry Essendine, a charming, self-absorbed actor who bears an uncanny resemblance to the playwright himself.

One of the reasons "Present Laughter" works so well is Coward's shrewd, sure sense of self-mockery, a quality Garber captures with ease. Coward played the starring role in England in 1942 and Clifton Webb starred in the first Broadway production in 1946. Subsequent New York revivals featured such diverse actors as George C. Scott and Frank Langella.

"I intend to grow old with distinction," the well-into-middle-age Essendine says early on in the play — before true mayhem sets in. Well, yes, there is a plot. But the story is slight, to the point of almost evaporating, but no matter. "Present Laughter" is a series of encounters.

Essendine is preparing for a tour of Africa, but before he goes he must tie up the strands of his perpetually busy — some might say "overextended" — life. What to do, for example, with the amorous young lady ensconced in the spare bedroom. "There's something awfully sad about happiness, isn't there?" murmurs Garry to this love-struck girl who has spent the night after losing the latch key to her own apartment.

Then there is the predatory wife of his producer, a woman determined to have an affair with Essendine despite his friendship with her husband. And what about an adoring, would-be playwright come to worship at the feet of his idol.

Finally, add the parade of household regulars including Essendine's estranged wife, his jaundiced secretary, a flip manservant and a crusty housekeeper dangling a cigarette with remarkable dexterity from her lips.

To bring all these folks together in an entertaining manner requires a serious craftsman, and Coward, author of such other comedy classics as "Private Lives," "Blithe Spirit" and "Design for Living," pulls off the feat without breaking a sweat. And that's a considerable achievement.

Coward even manages to explain how it is accomplished. Hard work.

In one of the play's most famous passages, Essendine admonishes the aspiring playwright: "Go and get yourself a job as a butler in a repertory company if they'll have you. Learn from the ground up how plays are constructed, what isactable and what isn't. Then sit down and write at least 20 plays, one after the one and if you can manage to get the twenty-first produced for a Sunday night performance you'll be damned lucky."

Essendine may be the sun around which "Present Laughter" revolves, but the comedy offers the large supporting cast some choices bits of comic business, too. Let's start with the revival's most extravagant performance: Brooks Ashmanskas' perpetual-motion portrait of the young writer. The actor is a comic whirlwind, initially quite funny but the velocity of his acting eventually leads to exhaustion — for the audience.

Sardonic is the word for the impeccable work of both Lisa Banes and Harriet Harris, equally ingratiating in their respective roles as Essendine's long-suffering wife and equally long-suffering secretary. And Holley Fain and Pamela Jane Gray offer nicely contrasting takes on how Essendine's female admirers attempt to snare the wily, commitment-adverse actor.

"Present Laughter" may be an almost farcical comedy, but director Martin ends the evening on a note of wistfulness — the cast singing one of Coward's best-known tunes, "I'll See You Again" from the operetta "Bitter Sweet." It's a touching reminder that laughter and sentiment were both justly celebrated by Coward himself.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 22, 2010

B'way Review: David Rooney

Present Laughter

(American Airlines Theater;
740 seats; \$116.50 top)

A Roundabout Theater Company presentation of a play in three acts by Noel Coward. Directed by Nicholas Martin. Set, Alexander Dodge; costumes, Jane Greenwood; lighting, Rui Rita; sound, Drew Levy; hair and wigs, Tom Watson; dialect coach, Deborah Hecht; production stage manager, Stephen M. Kaus. Opened Jan. 21, 2010. Reviewed Jan. 16. Running time: 2 HOURS, 30 MIN.

Garry Essendine Victor Garber
Roland Maule Brooks Ashmanskas
Monica Reed Harriet Harris
Liz Essendine Lisa Banes
Miss Erikson Nancy E. Carroll
Lady Saltburn Alice Duffy
Daphne Stillington Holley Fain
Joanna Lyppiatt Pamela Jane Gray
Fred James Joseph O'Neil
Henry Lyppiatt Richard Poe
Morris Dixon Marc Vietor

The silk dressing gowns and suave airs of aging matinee idol Garry Essendine are a fine fit for Victor Garber in "Present Laughter," as are the quietly melancholy undertones of a charming but vain peacock, too self-absorbed and infantile to appreciate the pleasures life affords him. He's housed in the swankiest of London apartments in Nicholas Martin's elegant production, with its gorgeous, honey-toned deco wall treatments and cascading chandeliers, dominated by a portrait of Garry as Hamlet that leaves no doubt as to who's the center of attention. But those assets can't keep a certain windy fatigue from creeping into Noel Coward's comedy.

This fourth Broadway revival of the 1939 play originated at Boston's Huntington Theater Company in 2007, during Martin's tenure there as artistic director, and frankly, it could have gained a little more oomph by recasting some of the supporting ranks.

Garry is the closest Coward comes in his plays to actually putting himself onstage. A world-weary playboy preparing to de-

part for the drudgery of a six-play repertory season in Africa, Garry sees his every need attended to by a retinue that includes his stoic secretary, Monica (Harriet Harris); his estranged but still affectionate wife, Liz (Lisa Banes); and business associates Henry (Richard Poe) and Morris (Marc Vietor). The precarious stability maintained by that unit of old friends is threatened by the escalating chaos of events kickstarted not so much by Garry's indiscretions as by his childlike inability to be alone for more than a few minutes.

Garry is a ceaseless performer, flamboyantly commanding center-stage in his own everyday melodrama. And while Garber purveys a fine line in exquisite boredom, petulance and monumentally put-upon exasperation, it's obvious the character couldn't function without his loyal supporters. "A charming constellation of gossipy little planets circling 'round the great glorious sun" is how one resentful outsider puts it.

Martin's production is at its best — and truest to the sophistication and restraint that is key to Coward's comedy — when Garry is interacting with that core group. Poe and Vietor can't do much with their minor roles, but Harris' brittle acerbity and Banes' cool, collected veneer play nicely off Garber's mischievous self-awareness. Both women suggest the intuitive understanding and shorthand communication that come from time-tested, frequently strained but protective relationships with their demanding charge.

It's with the interlopers that the production's weaknesses — and the three-act play's occasionally saggy structure — become apparent. Necessary as it is to lay the groundwork for Garry's apathetic philandering and the transparent ruse of the women who maneuver their way

into his busy evenings, the opening setup is made laborious by Holley Fain's flat turn as besotted ingenue Daphne. Her comic instincts don't go far beyond careful attention to the plummy English accent.

More conniving than Daphne but no less stiff a presence is Henry's man-eating wife, Joanna, given such a studied reading by Pamela Jane Gray that her pivotal second-act seduction of Garry is slowed to a numbing crawl.

At the other end of the spectrum is Brooks Ashmanskas as sycophantic aspiring playwright Roland Maule, his performance an exhausting eddy of prancing moves, demented tics and excited gesticulation that yields laughs but is more often distracting. Ashmanskas is responsible for a funny running physical gag involving Roland's overly zealous handshake, but while the role calls, to some degree, for excessive antics, there's a little too much of everything going on in his scenes.

In addition to Alexander Dodge's swoon-inducing set (which features a staircase worthy of a Jerry Herman musical), the production's visual polish extends to Jane Green-

wood's soigne costumes and Rui Rita's mellow lighting, handsomely evoking the shifts between day and night. A sprinkling of Coward songs, including "World Weary" performed by Garber at the piano, and "I'll See You Again" cooed by the ensemble at the curtain, adds to the refined atmosphere.

It's all very classy and urbane, as it should be, and there's an ample stash of still-sparkling gems among the dialogue. But the production is too unevenly cast and paced to be more than mildly amusing.



Brooks Ashmanskas portrays a playwright and Victor Garber an aging matinee idol in Noel Coward's "Present Laughter."

BONEAU/BRYAN-BROWN

January 22, 2010

REVIEW: THEATER | By Terry Teachout

The Importance of Intimate Simplicity

PRESENT LAUGHTER
Roundabout Theatre Company,
American Airlines Theatre,
227 W. 42nd St. (\$66.50-\$116.50),
212-719-1300, closes Mar. 21

The revival of Noël Coward's "Present Laughter" that opened on Broadway this week under the auspices of the Roundabout Theatre Company is the same one that I saw performed in Boston three years ago by the Huntington Theatre Company, give or take a couple of new cast members. I liked it with significant reservations in 2007, and I feel the same way now: It's effective, but not the "Present Laughter" of my dreams.

The play, written in 1939 and last seen on Broadway 13 years ago, is one of Coward's finest, a coruscating piece of autobiographical spoofery in which he sent himself up with unexpected honesty (Garry Essendine, Coward's onstage alter ego, is a charismatic but by no means likable piece of fancy goods). In this production, directed with a too-broad brush by Nicholas Martin, Victor Garber is "doing" Coward himself rather than creating a character from scratch, and though his imitation of Coward's speaking voice is eerily exact, he lacks the sleek physical glamour of his well-remembered model. Mr. Garber gets his laughs, but it's hard to see why so many of the women in the play feel moved to fling themselves at his feet. (He is also 20 years older than Essendine and looks it, thus necessitating a fair amount of fiddling with Coward's original dialogue.)

As Liz, Essendine's estranged and disillusioned wife, Lisa Banes is as dry as a hot saltine and as funny as . . . well, a play by Noël Coward. With one exception, everyone else in the cast is up to or in the vicinity of her high standard: Brooks Ashmanskas ignores the script and camps it up as Roland Maule, the dourly earnest



Left, Noah Racey and Ian Holcomb in "Ernest in Love." Above, Victor Garber and Lisa Banes in "Present Laughter."

young playwright who develops a crush on Essendine, vulgarizing beyond recognition every scene in which he appears. He, too, gets his laughs, but the show as a whole pays a high price for them.

If you've never seen "Present Laughter," go and enjoy yourself: It's a comic gem, and this production is much better than none at all. The set alone, an Art Deco orgy designed by Alexander Dodge, is almost worth the price of admission. If you know the play at all well, though, you won't need to be told what Messrs. Martin, Garber and Ashmanskas are getting wrong, and why it matters.

NEW YORK ONE

Weekend of January 23, 2010

Present Laughter review

By Roma Torre

It's always a joy to hear the silken wit of Noel Coward. The best productions seem effortless though "getting it right" requires a tricky balance of elegance, spot on performances and an impeccable sense of timing. The Roundabout's "Present Laughter" comes pretty darn close. Designed to perfection and impressively cast, it's as light as a soufflé with the kick of a fine brandy.

Garry Essendine, a matinee idol, is something of a stand-in for Coward himself. Even at home he's always on stage...a ham with a heart whose every exchange is a soliloquy, every situation a drama. A 1930's star, he's orbited by a galaxy of sycophants and hangers-on, along with a supportive staff and friends who endlessly bounce in and out of his luxurious London flat.

There's not much action. Plot takes a back seat to character...attitude and style are key...and so it jolly well goes on Alexander Dodge's gorgeous set. And thanks to Jane Greenwood's exquisite costumes, everyone looks simply divine.

If Victor Garber isn't a natural fit as Garry, he has the talent to pull it off quite convincingly with a splendid mix of flamboyance and sophistication. An added bonus is the lovely voice he brings to Coward's comically bittersweet tune World Weary. He's a generous stage presence blending comfortably with the rest of the capable ensemble.

Chief among them, Harriet Harris as Monica, his unflappably loyal secretary. One of Broadway's most accomplished character actresses, she delivers yet again with great flair.

Lisa Banes as Garry's estranged but protective wife and Pamela Jane Gray, a predatory seductress, strike just the right notes.

And while Brooks Ashmanskas, as a crazed, stalking playwright seems to hail from a different planet, he's nevertheless very funny.

Part farce, part character study, PRESENT LAUGHTER was described by Coward as "a series of autobiographical pyrotechnics". Indeed nothing much happens in this amusing if dated comedy... running more than two and a half hours with two intermissions, it's a tribute to Nicholas Martin's delightful production that what may seem rather short on substance is very long on style.

After the Ball

By Scott Brown

The new production of Noël Coward's *Present Laughter* delivers as expected: finely wrought farce, sophisticated banter, and a winsome, easy-to-take view of aging.

Victor Garber, God bless him, can wear the daylights out of a dressing gown. He can even make an old one look...well, not new, exactly, but damned comfortable. And "comfortable" is the word that pops immediately into mind after experiencing the gentle, genial charms of the Roundabout's *Present Laughter*, a comedy about aging ungracefully, the silken pleasures of decompensation, and the people we choose to grow old with, to the extent that we have any choice in the matter. Under the steady, only occasionally leaden hand of veteran comedy director Nicholas Martin, this faultlessly acted, psychologically pristine, almost excessively grounded production fuses Noël Coward's most bohemian themes—the insupportable nature of marriage, the delicious hypocrisies of polite society—with his most boulevard instincts. It's a sex farce that dismantles its own flamboyance before our eyes and ends up feeling strangely, unaccountably plausible. Laughter is indeed present throughout, but it's a kind of background radiation.

In the foreground is Garry Essendine (Garber), aging divo and stage legend, for whom a life in the theater has become a never-never land of dependable, unchallenging gigs and casual sleepovers with disposable young admirers. He's a human mirror, an actor who's always acting—"watching myself go by," he wistfully informs his latest young mistress, Daphne (Holley Fain), as he's ushering her out of his life. A mock-Hamlet in his own mock-tragedy—in song, he claims to want to "get right back to nature/Assume a horizontal stature"—he's still trying to play Peer Gynt, refusing to acknowledge that he's ripe for Falstaff. But that doesn't keep him from regularly banishing the villainous company he blames for his ruin. Of course, we see from the start that Garry can't really be alone: Without company, without his self-generated intrigues and picaresques, he'd implode into the void within, the very nothingness that makes him such an attractive vacuum in the first place. Garry's a deceptively tough role—a leading man who imperiously refuses to lead—and Garber, best known to TV and movie audiences for his fatherly supporting parts, makes Garry both commanding and marginal, a dominant nonentity. He plays Essendine's famous mirror gag—every ring of the doorbell requires him to adjust his receding coif—with an ataractic quality that makes the maneuver feel less like a stagy bit and more like an untreatable condition. And his inverse-seduction scene with the vampire Joanna (a lusciously gelid Pamela Jane Gray), a sexually hungry, unforgivably "all-female" climber who threatens to break up the Essendine klatch, is a rare piece of perfectly earned, Swiss-watch scene work.

Of course, into every orderly Coward universe, a meteor of pure, luminous madness must plummet: Brooks Ashmanskas, that one-man comedy demolition squad recently seen in *The Ritz*, bounds in as Roland Maule, an unbalanced, young, experimental playwright fixated on Essendine. He says he's from "Uckfield," but he's clearly from outer space. Literally bouncing off the walls—and the furniture, and his fellow actors—with flubbery antigravity, Maule, written as a destabilizing force, becomes almost

terrifying in Martin's production: The play's humors have been so fastidiously balanced that the introduction of this juggernaut has a jaggedly unnerving effect, even as he furnishes the play's broadest laughs. In fact, Ashmanskas almost feels like a vestige of some madder concept lurking behind the brute Deco opulence of Alexander Dodge's ravishing set. But don't worry: Though the chandelier may shudder a bit, it's never in danger of crashing. That's both a comfort and letdown, not unlike growing old.

January 22, 2010

'Laughter' is the vain event



Joe Dziemianowicz

Broadway's new "Present Laughter" is a gleeful take on Noel Coward's story of a vain stage star and the eccentrics in his orbit and on his payroll.

Garry Essendine, the author's heterosexual avatar, is a parading peacock. The play is a witty lark, one with a tendency to fly in circles instead of advancing.

Still, it's easy to luxuriate in the language. Coward wrote the play in 1939 but, due to the onset of World War II, didn't perform it until three years later.

His insights into celebrity, growing old, and hanging on when everyone's counting on you to bring home the bacon remain relevant.

Garry might just be a forerunner of "Entourage's" Vincent Chase.

Unlike revivals that seek out dark shadows in the comedy, like the production I saw in 2007 at London's National Theatre that overstated the wartime era, director Nicholas Martin keeps things brisk and bright. His staging for the Roundabout is all the sunnier, funnier and more successful for it.

The plot traces a few days in Garry's London home, where he's preparing to

go on tour to Africa and volleying with various seducers. Alexander Dodge has fashioned delicious art-deco digs. Jane Greenwood's glam 1930s costumes flatter not only the cast, but the scenery. Win-win.

As the mirror-mad matinee idol, Broadway veteran Victor Garber, famous for films (he went down with the ship in "Titanic") and TV (he shot from the hip on "Alias") is droll and appealing. His Garry is as self-aware as he is self-obsessed. Sure, he sighs, groans and even sings about craving solitude, but we know he knows that he instantly wilts

when he's not being coddled or cuddled.

A cast of characters is on hand to do that. Harriet Harris is hilarious as Monica, Garry's secretary and sometime dragon-lady gatekeeper; Lisa Banes lends sophisticated calm as his not-quite-ex-wife, Liz, and Pamela Jane Gray plays Joanne, an oversexed omnivore who makes every word from

her mouth, especially "latchkey," sound fabulously filthy.

As Roland Maule, a writer who practically stalks Essendine, Brooks Ashmanskas is a 3-D cartoon. He poses, prances and vaults into the air — at times getting NBA-worthy hang time. Coward didn't traffic in over-the-top, but when Ashmanskas is on stage, it's omnipresent laughter. Works for the show; works for me.

jdziemianowicz@nydailynews.com

★★★★★
'Present Laughter'
 Through March 21. American
 Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St.
 Tickets: \$66.50-\$115.50
 (212) 719-1300



Brooks Ashmanskas (l.) and Victor Garber in the revival of the World War II-era comedy

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

JANUARY 22, 2010

A disappointing 'Present'

Coward revival offers little beyond the trappings

BY LINDA WINER

linda.winer@newsday.com

Actors are waving prop cigarettes around the stage again, playing dress-up in dressing gowns again and pretending, with variable success, to be terribly sophisticated in yet another demi-classic comedy from the '20s and '30s about the travails of aging thespians.

If playwrights wrote about anything but theater folk with grand pianos in the decades between the World Wars, you wouldn't know it from the narrow choices lately by Broadway's nonprofit theaters. Since last spring, we have had David Hyde Pierce as a womanizing midlife playwright in "Accent on Youth," three generations of an acting dynasty in "The Royal Family" and now Victor Garber as the womanizing midlife star in "Present Laughter."

This is the 1939 Noël Coward

WHAT "Present Laughter"
WHERE American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St.
INFO \$66.50-\$116.50; 212-719-1300; roundabouttheatre.org
BOTTOM LINE Coward mugged

escapade about 50-ish matinee idol Garry Essendine, surrounded by women (and men) who want his body, and by his close circle of wise-cracking theater associates, including an almost ex-wife, who supports in him friendship and business.

And that's really all there is, except for the absolutely critical element — style. Without it, the Roundabout Theatre Company's revival is basically just another

swanky deco set (by Alexander Dodge) with smart costumes (Jane Greenwood), dowdy wigs and a fabulous winding staircase to nowhere of interest.

The good director Nicholas Martin is clearly not in his element here. Instead of trusting the devastations of Coward's offhand wit, he stomps breezy gestures with the heavy foot of running gags and exaggerated eccentricities.

Garber, a theater pleasure long before he played Jennifer Garner's father in "Alias," is not ideally cast as Garry, a flawed, impossibly attractive fellow created to play off Coward's own world-weary and wry elegance. Frank Langella last played the character here in 1996 as a big, bossy peacock who knew the value of a tantrum and a good vanity mirror. Garber almost makes the role work on his own terms, a troubled nice guy, less declining master tragedian than popular star of light romances and the ingénues that come with them.

Of the large cast, only Harriet Harris, as his capable, snappy secretary, and Lisa Banes, as his protective almost ex, survive the direction unscathed. Pamela Jane Gray is harsh and unsympathetic as the supposedly irresistible man-eating Joanna. And Brooks Ashmanskas is unbearable, encouraged to flit and flounce and strike obnoxious poses as the young male playwright obsessed with Garry. Oh, and at the end, the ritzy people and the servants: they're around the piano and, as if Coward hadn't been mugged enough, sing.



Victor Garber and Lisa Banes star in "Present Laughter," a vintage comedy by Noël Coward.

PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

NEW YORK POST

January 22, 2010

Few laughs but a fancy setting

PRODUCERS seem to think of Noel Coward plays as safe bets in uncertain times: Dress the stars in smoking jackets and gorgeous gowns, surround them with canny supporting players, and plop everybody down in an ostentatious period set. The text itself will be critic-proof, and audiences will be enchanted by the witty exchanges.

If only it were that easy.

The Roundabout's revival of "Present Laughter" that opened last night hits all of these targets — Alexander Dodge's lavish deco decor, in particular, gets applause — and yet it almost never feels right. We're a far cry from "Brief Encounter," the warm-hearted British import that recently proved that one can be both innovative and true to Coward.

"Present Laughter" pivots around Garry Essendine, a popular, vain thespian whom the playwright — who created the part — modeled after himself.

Essendine (Victor Garber) is an incorrigible flirt for whom every interaction is based on seduction and play-acting. He's always on, but he's also genuinely charismatic, and capable of unexpected flashes of self-awareness — the cad is entering middle age, after all.



Victor Garber is handsome but not very playful.

Joan Marcus

But as Garber portrays him, this player isn't very playful. He almost never projects the kind of centrifugal force necessary to keep his support system (house staff, admirers of both sexes and assorted friends) orbiting around him.

As doors slam, people hide in spare rooms and even Essendine's normally unflappable secretary, Monica Reed (Harriet Harris), becomes overwhelmed, Garber looks as if he's disconnected from both the action and his castmates. Director Nicholas Martin even keeps him seated for much of the time, reinforcing an impression of passivity.

Typically, the confrontations between Essendine and his two biggest irritants aren't as funny as they should be. Our Lothario is less confident when he's a target — and suddenly, two loose cannons have him in their sights.

The first is eager young playwright Roland Maule (Brooks Ashmanskas, literally bouncing off the furniture in an attention-grabbing performance); the second is man-hungry Joanna Lyppiatt (Pamela Jane Gray, coldly sexy), who's married to a friend of Essendine's while conducting an affair with another.

The performances are fun to watch — and Garber does have a smooth charm — except that they belong to different shows.

The last time "Present Laughter" was on Broadway — with Frank Langella, in 1996 — the production brought whatever homoerotic subtext one chooses to see in the play to the foreground. None of that here, but then little of any kind is brought to the foreground. Except for big, comfy-looking leather furniture.

Have I mentioned that the set is fancy? It bears repeating. elisabeth.vincentelli@nypost.com

THEATER REVIEW



Elisabeth
Vincentelli

**PRESENT
LAUGHTER**

★★ 1/2

American Airlines Theatre, 227
W. 42nd St.; 212-719-1300.

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

BLOOMBERG

January 22, 2010

Corn-fed Garber Mismatched With 'Present Laughter': John Simon

Jan. 22 (Bloomberg) -- **Noel Coward's** sophisticated 1943 comedy, "Present Laughter," is about the fraught goings-on just before stellar actor Garry Essendine's departure on a lengthy African tour.

Various avid women (and one man) are going unsolicitedly after him, the injured leading actress crumps out, and relationships with much-needed associates are threateningly impaired.

Coward described "Present Laughter" as "not so much a play as a series of semiautobiographical pyrotechnics," and obviously wrote it for himself.

The fine actor **Victor Garber** is miscast in the **Roundabout's** Broadway revival. His problems are age (60 for Coward's called- for 44), looks (an ingenuous, slightly corn-fed countenance) and a basic bland quality. He toils visibly at being bitchy, rather than having histrionic unnaturalness come naturally.

Alexander Dodge, an expert in opulent stage design, provides a sumptuous Art Deco set, a trifle too lavish even for a stage star's "studio" that Coward calls for. It overpowers a production based by director Nicholas Martin on his 2007, more modest Boston mounting.

The women in Garry's life are as follows:

Daphne Stillington, a 23-year-old would-be actress and star-struck worshiper, someone Garry picked up for a one-night stand, but who outdoes a burr in tenacity.

Funny Frump

Joanna, a gorgeous, man-eating vamp, wife to Garry's producer, Henry Lyppiatt, and mistress to his director, Morris Dixon, while sharpening her claws for Garry.

Finally, Garry's practical, more mature wife, Liz, long separated, but still in some ways watching over him. Also Monica Reed, his tough, trusty secretary, who may not admit even to herself the reason for her obdurate devotion.

There is also, in adoration if not love, Roland Maule, a preposterous young, would-be playwright who pursues and pesters Garry for probably more than guidance. Only the comic Swedish maid, Miss Erikson, and the cocky Cockney manservant, Fred, maintain some independence.

Some cast members are up to snuff. Lisa Banes as a cogently solid Liz, Holley Fain as a gushily clinging Daphne, Harriet Harris as a serenely sardonic Monica. As Miss Erikson, Nancy E. Carroll, though not very Swedish, is funnily frumpish, and in somewhat underwritten parts, James Joseph O'Neil (Fred), Richard Poe (Henry), Marc Vietor (Morris), and Alice Duffy (Daphne's dowager aunt), helped by Jane Greenwood's stylish costuming, largely satisfy.

Two Disasters

But there are two disasters. Pamela Jane Gray is neither the gorgeous siren Joanna needs to be nor, what with monotonously gummy delivery, what we can easily take. No less painful is the

manifestly overdirected Roland of Brooks Ashmanskas, who carries on like a Mexican jumping bean.

The text has undergone cuts, rephrasings, and some peculiar additions, including a redundant, musical-comedy second ending. Still, no one can quite kill Coward.

American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. Information: +1- 212-719-1300;
<http://www.roundabouttheatre.org>. Rating: **

The Hollywood Reporter

January 21, 2010

Present Laughter -- Theater Review

By Frank Scheck

Bottom Line: You need more than the right smoking jacket to put across Noel Coward's classic comedy.

Unless a comedy by Noel Coward is played with perfect precision, it tends to have the taste of champagne that has lost its fizz. Such is the case with the Roundabout's Broadway revival of "Present Laughter." In this production, the name of the lead character of aging matinee idol Garry Essendine, modeled on the playwright himself, has been reduced to Garry. Like that wayward letter, something has been lost along the way.

Director Nicholas Martin would have seemed to be on the right track with his casting of Victor Garber. The handsome, naturally elegant actor -- making a too-long-delayed return to the New York stage -- would seem to be a perfect fit for Essendine, or at least the fancy smoking jackets of which the character is inordinately fond.

But Garber seems to be resisting the larger-than-life elements of the role, attempting to convey the psychological truth of Essendine's midlife crisis rather than the vainglorious aspects of his personality. The results are a "Present Laughter" without much laughter, indeed.

(By the way, one needn't be British to play Essendine convincingly, as George C. Scott and Frank Langella entertainingly proved in previous Broadway mountings.)

The supporting cast is somewhat more effective, with particularly strong turns by Lisa Banes as Garry's still-doting ex-wife and the always reliable Harriet Harris as his acerbic secretary. On the other hand, Brooks Ashmanskas, as the aspiring playwright desperate for Essendine's attentions, is wildly over the top, delivering an outsized slapstick turn that jars with the rest of the production. (Admittedly, his efforts were greeted with much raucous laughter from the audience, who might have appreciated being relieved from their general torpor).

As is usually the case with Roundabout shows, the production is wonderfully elegant, featuring a gorgeous art deco depiction of Essendine's London flat and costumes so sumptuous that you can practically sense the enjoyment of the actors wearing them. Too bad more of that pleasure couldn't have been shared by the audience.

The Record

JANUARY 22, 2010

Little laughter present

By **ROBERT FELDBERG**
STAFF WRITER

The revival of Noël Coward's "Present Laughter," which opened Thursday night at the American Airlines Theatre, is like a glass of champagne that's been sitting too long: Except for a few lonely little bubbles, there's no fizz.

Instead of being a buoyant comic romp, the 1942 play slogs along without much verve or energy. It's frequently revived — it was previously done on Broadway in the 1980s and '90s — but its slightness has never been made more evident.

The story concerns several hectic days in the life of a vain, egotistical, middle-aged matinee idol, Garry Essendine (Victor Garber).

He's besieged by two women (Pamela Jane Gray and Holley Fain) who want to make love to him, as well as an obsessed young male playwright (Brooks Ashmanskas) who seems to have the same intention.

Also on hand is Essendine's clever wife (Lisa Banes), separated but loyal, a producer (Richard Poe), a director (Marc Vietor), and the requisite smart-aleck secretary (Harriet Harris) and oddball household staff (James Joseph O'Neil and Nancy E. Carroll).

Essendine, who's about to begin an African tour, feels very put-upon, and is extremely aware of getting older, but there's not much else, in the script, to him. Everything depends on the performance.

Coward, who played Essendine in the original British production, said that he wrote the play in order to give himself a bravura role. And the play does badly need a distinctive, larger-than-life star turn — a matinee idol to play a matinee idol.

George C. Scott had the role in the 1982 revival (with Nathan Lane as the besotted playwright), and Frank Langella played the part in 1996.

Garber, who's a very good actor, gives a perfectly fine, amusing portrayal of Essendine. But he doesn't exude the extravagant personal style required to dominate the evening.

The direction, by Nicholas Martin, has a few funny physical bits, but is otherwise sluggish, and with the exception of Banes' charming turn as the wife, the other performances are unremarkable.

As the erratic playwright, Ashmanskas executes a lot of strange physical movements that are more bizarre than amusing. And Harris, the most dependably humorous of all character actresses, seems constrained, failing to deliver the laughs you'd expect.

After taking their curtain calls, the actors, carefully posed on the art deco set, sing Coward's "I'll See You Again."

The attempt to inject sophistication and poignancy — something essentially Cowardian — into the evening is a textbook example of too little, too late.

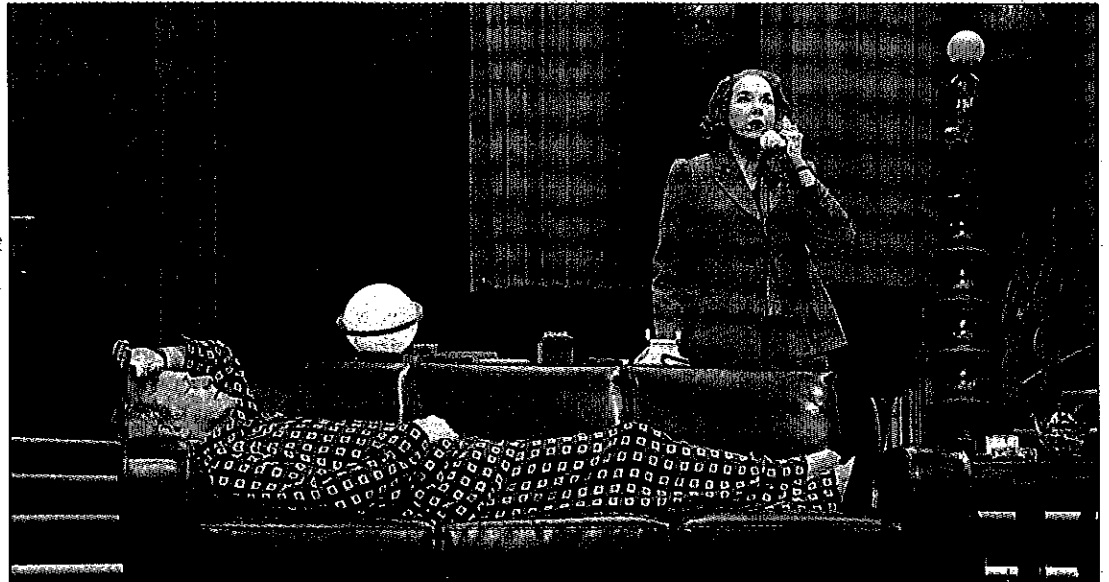
REVIEW PRESENT LAUGHTER

Broadway play revival, presented by the Roundabout Theatre Company at the American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St.

Written by Noël Coward. Directed by Nicholas Martin. With Victor Garber, Harriet Harris and Brooks Ashmanskas.

Schedule: 8 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday and Friday; 2 and 8 p.m. Wednesday and Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday.

Tickets: \$66.50 to \$116.50. Roundabout Ticket Services: 212-719-1300 or roundabouttheatre.org.



Victor Garber and Harriet Harris in Broadway's "Present Laughter."

JOAN MARCUS

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

The Star-Ledger

January 22, 2010

Cowardly act VICTOR GARBER STRUGGLES TO PROP UP COMEDY

By Robert Feldberg
THE RECORD

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The story concerns several hectic days in the life of a vain, egotistical, middle-aged matinee idol, Garry Essendine (Victor Garber). He's besieged by two women (Pamela Jane Gray and Holley Fain) who want to make love to him, as well as an obsessed young male playwright (Brooks Ashmanskas) who seems to have the same intention.

Also on hand is Essendine's clever wife (Lisa Banes), separated but loyal, a producer (Richard Poe), a director (Marc Vietor), and the requisite smart-aleck secretary (Harriet Harris) and oddball household staff (James Joseph O'Neil

Present Laughter

Where: American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St., New York

When: Through March 21. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2 and 8 p.m.; Sundays at 2 p.m.

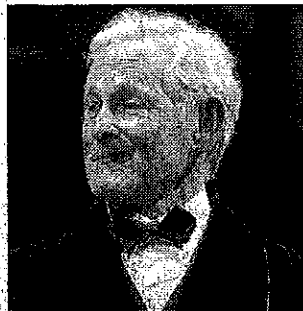
How much: \$88.50-\$118.50. Call (212) 719-1300 or visit roundabouttheatre.org.

and Nancy E. Carroll).

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Garber, who's a very good



JOAN MARCUS

VICTOR GARBER

actor and a veteran of television and film, gives a perfectly fine, amusing portrayal of Essendine. But he doesn't exude the extravagant personal style required to dominate the evening.

The direction, by Nicholas Martin, has a few funny physical bits, but is otherwise sluggish, and with the exception of Banes' charming wife, the supporting performances are unremarkable.

As the erratic playwright, Ashmanskas executes a lot of strange physical movements that are more bizarre than amusing. And Harris, the most dependably humorous of all character actresses, seems constrained, failing to deliver the laughs you'd expect.

After taking their curtain calls, the actors, carefully

posed on the art deco set, sing Coward's "I'll See You Again." The attempt to inject sophistication and poignancy — something essentially Cowardian — into the evening is a textbook example of too little, too late.

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

Present Laughter

Reviewed on WOR Radio 710 on Friday January 22nd

David Richardson Theater Critic for WOR Radio 710

You know Joe I'm a real Noel Coward fan and when I heard that his Present Laughter which originally starred Clifton Webb back in 1947 and much later Frank Langella, was coming back to Broadway, I couldn't wait to see it. Well it opened last night and while some parts of the show lumber along, especially early in the proceedings, the show is outrageously funny and, even if dated beyond imagination, is just terrific and a show you just have to see,

What makes this comedy about a loner, who is about to go on a trip to Africa, who has to cope with ingénues, theatrical producers, a former wife and a nutball of a playwright, is the super cast. Victor Garber plays our lonely hero who everyone's in love with, Harriet Harris is his sarcastic social secretary and Brooks Ashmanskas plays a whirling dervish of an aspiring playwright and almost steals the show.

The costumes are to die for and the art deco set is just plain spectacular.

Now I can't say this show is for everyone since the younger generation may yawn, but those of us who have been around for awhile are just going to love this **sophisticated Romp**. Present Laughter ...it really will make you laugh which is more than most shows allow one to do these days.

FINANCIAL TIMES

January 22, 2010

Present Laughter, American Airlines Theater, New York

By Brendan Lemon

When Nicholas Martin's accomplished, enjoyable production of Noël Coward's *Present Laughter* premiered in Boston in 2007, I compared its mood of shammed madness to that of *Hamlet*. Seeing this 1939 comedy again, on Broadway, in the Roundabout's handsome 42nd Street space, I flashed more often to *Twelfth Night*, whence Coward plucks the play's name ("present mirth hath present laughter").

Since the previous outing, Martin has discarded most traces of shamming or even introspection and taken us to a realm of purer, more Feste-like jesting. Garry Essendine, Coward's alter ego and the main character in *Present Laughter*, is comically undone each time the front doorbell rings at his London flat.

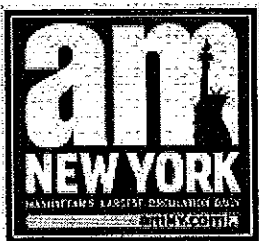
Garry, a matinee idol, is readying for a tour of Africa, but everyone – from his casually estranged wife to a manic young playwright – attempts to disturb his peace. That wife, Liz, who is imbued with terrific sangfroid by Lisa Banes, diagnoses Garry's overriding problem: you are, she tells him, "advancing with every sign of reluctance into middle age".

Mirroring our own time, when many people huff indignantly if you suggest that 65 is not middle aged but old, this production moves the middle-age marker from 40, which corresponded to Coward's age at the time of composition, to roughly 50.

Victor Garber, who portrays Garry in the current staging, is 60. Lost to Los Angeles and television salaries for the past decade, Garber makes a welcome return to Broadway. Gliding exasperatedly across Alexander Dodge's deco set and inhabiting Jane Greenwood's elegant dressing gowns, Garber wisely avoids making Coward ostentatiously sophisticated.

Coward's style seemed hopelessly outmoded in the 1950s and '60s, but now his dialogue sounds less sophisticated than stilted. The revival of sophistication on television (*Frasier*, Stewie on *Family Guy*) makes *Present Laughter* seem laboured: it can take an eternity, verbally, to set up a joke.

A climactic physical gag between the playwright, played by Brooks Ashmanskas, and a dowager, played by Alice Duffy, remains priceless, but Ashmanskas's wide-eyed leaping about tended to grate the second time around. And the line readings of the lovely Pamela Jane Gray, as Garry's seducer Joanna, slow down the evening's pace too much. Otherwise, *Present Laughter* is delightful. (★★★★☆)



JANUARY 22-24, 2010

Revival could use reviving

Present Laughter



BY MATT WINDMAN
amNewYork theater critic

The new Broadway revival of "Present Laughter," Noel Coward's 1939 farce about an egomaniacal matinee idol in the midst of a midlife crisis, feels strangely deflated and stale. It's as if someone accidentally let the air out of its tires.

This unapologetically silly, wonderfully witty star vehicle observes the crazy goings-on in the posh London pad of Garry Essendine, a thinly disguised stand-in for Coward himself who pauses every few minutes to catch a glimpse of himself in the mirror or soliloquize in front of houseguests.

Just before Garry is to depart for a lecture tour in Africa, he receives surprise visits from a manic, obsessive playwright, a starstruck young actress, his estranged wife and his new lover. More often than not, a character is

forced to hide in the closet as someone else arrives.

While the play still has the potential to pack a punch, Nicholas Martin's production is slow, flat, fake and devoid of any concept or inspiration.

This leaves most of his cast desperately scrambling to mug as much as possible.

Victor Garber, though a seemingly smart casting choice for Garry, acts so broadly and busily as to indicate that he is lost and in need of direction.

He begins and ends his performance at the same level of pent-up frustration, ignoring all subtlety and Coward's eternal elegance.

The supporting cast is at odds stylistically. While Lisa Banes is convincingly understated as Garry's wife, Brooks Ashmanskas aims for pure screwball comedy as the oddball playwright who unexpectedly becomes Garry's most devoted fan.

Though Ashmanskas' performance is dangerously over-the-top, he manages to leap across the stage with a giddy, airborne quality that is missing from the rest of the production.

Victor Garber and Lisa Banes star in this screwball comedy.



ON STAGE

'Present Laughter' is at American Airlines Theatre through March 21.

■ 227 W. 42nd St., 212-719-1300, roundabouttheatre.org

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

THE NEW YORKER

FEBRUARY 1, 2010

THE THEATRE

DEVIL IN THE FLESH

Arthur Miller and Noël Coward on acting out.

BY JOHN LAHR

Where Eddie Carbone is a figure of odium, Garry Essendine, the matinée idol at the center of Noël Coward's classic light comedy "Present Laughter" (a Roundabout Theatre Company production, at the American Airlines), is a figure of adoration. "Everybody worships me, it's nauseating," Essendine (the expert Victor Garber) says, descending in a silk dressing gown into a living room that looks like the Art Deco lobby of the Savoy. Essendine is a charm machine, trapped in the perpetual performance of his public self. "I'm always acting—watching myself go by," he says. Through Essendine, Coward teases his own public persona and works its magic at the same time. The play sets up a series of challenges for Essendine's equanimity, the most testing of which is the appearance at his door of an uncouth critic and would-be playwright, the well-named Roland Maule (Brooks Ashmanskas). "All you do with your talent is wear dressing-gowns and make witty remarks when you might be really helping people, making them think! Making them feel," the jittery critic says. But no sooner has Essendine doled out one of Coward's famous "finger wags" than Maule, too, falls under Essendine's spell. "You're wonderful!" he says. Ashmanskas deserves some kind of award for scene-stealing—he postures, minces, sprawls, and caroms around the stage like a human pinball. His lampoon, however, is entirely out of keeping with the satire.

"Every moment I'm near him I get smoother and smoother," Maule says, though, from first entrance to last, there is no transformation in Ashmanskas's zany behavior.

The director, Nicholas Martin, who is good at comedy, should have known better. He has brought together an excellent ensemble and a handsome set by Alexander Dodge, but he has somehow lost faith in Coward's underlying argument. For Coward, wit was an act of non-friction, an enchantment that allowed him to evade scrutiny. All Coward's major comedies end in escape; the protagonists tiptoe away from chaos. This happens in "Hay Fever," "Private Lives," and "Blithe Spirit," as well as in "Present Laughter." Not, however, in the Roundabout's production, where the cast ambles offstage only to return for a sing-along of "I'll See You Again." Coward's ending is inspired comedy; Martin's is sentimental claptrap. ♦

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

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**LESLEY ALEXANDER'S
THEATRE REVIEWS
WHITNEY RADIO**

***Present Laughter* Roundabout Theatre Company; Airdate: Monday 1/25/10**

This is **Lesley Alexander** with today's **Broadway Review**.

Witty repartee is synonymous with Noël Coward and in his tongue-in-cheek autobiographical comedy, *Present Laughter*, the characters ooze sophistication from an era that seems several lifetimes ago. But the **Roundabout's** revival, based upon a 2007 Boston production, also directed by **Nicholas Martin**, is the very essence of droll humor about celebrity narcissism. Sort of timely in a dated sort of way. And while this *Present Laughter* is pleasant enough, and star **Victor Garber**, as Gary Essendine, plays the properly reserved actor with a capital 'A' (subject to fits of exasperation), the production could use just a tad more in the way of overall belly laughs.

The absolutely scrumptious set from **Alexander Dodge** of Essendine's art deco townhouse is a wonder all to itself as **Garber** saunters down the stairs sidestepping one, or another, of his many devotees. Among them, a wannabe playwright completely off his rocker played with frenzied glee by **Brooks Ashmanskas**.

He's also busy with business associates all of whom seem to be cheating on each other and his very clipped long-time secretary who takes none of his guff. **Harriet Harris** has once again fulfilled the role of those snappy one-liners with gusto. **Lisa Banes** as the ex-wife, and constant friend, does a swell job inserting a bit of empathy into Essendine's otherwise vapid existence as he worries about aging and his continued future as a theatrical matinee idol, when he pines, "There's something awfully sad about being happy,"

Coward's play isn't about much other than the futility of living for applause. But then again, *Present Laughter* offers plenty of that!

For **WVOX-Worldwide** this is **Lesley Alexander**

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THE
NEW YORK OBSERVER

February 1, 2010

THEATER

BY JESSE OXFELD

It's been a tough few years for revivals of old three-act farces set in the spacious living rooms of self-absorbed theater people. First, last spring, came the dreadful *Accent on Youth*, from 1934, in which David Hyde Pierce played an aging playwright in love with his secretary. Then the fall brought *The Royal Family*, George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber's 1927 sendup of the Barrymores, which required audiences to sit through three often-dull hours for the pleasures of its lovely second act.

But now, finally, there's Noël Coward's 1939 *Present Laughter*, which opened in a funny, fresh and entirely entertaining revival at the Roundabout Theatre Company's American Airlines Theatre last week. It, too, has the requisite living-room set: a decadent Deco duplex with leather couches and a flowing stairway. But, much more important, it's got a script of witty Coward epigrams and a veteran and very funny cast—under the fleet direction of Nicholas Martin—to deliver them.

Victor Garber plays Garry Essendine, a role Coward wrote for himself, an over-the-top star of the London stage. He's delightfully entitled, hammy and petulant. Even better is Harriet Harris, who steals each scene she's in as his arch, droll secretary. Brooks Ashmanskas eventually grows a bit tiresome as an eccentric young playwright attempting to ingratiate himself with Essendine, a high-energy collection of nervous tics and prissy mannerisms. But his initial meeting with Harris' secretary—a handshake face-off—is some of the best comedic acting I've seen.

Time Out New York

January 28–February 3, 2010

Present Laughter

★★★☆☆

American Airlines Theatre (see Broadway). By Noël Coward. Dir. Nicholas Martin. With Victor Garber. 2hrs 30mins. Two intermissions.

Direction is often the hardest thing for a critic to pinpoint. Unless they're making concept-driven *regietheater*, most directors strive to bury their efforts in design, casting and subtle massaging of themes. But for Noël Coward's semifarcical *Present Laughter*, you know how director Nicholas Martin spent rehearsal time: keeping Brooks Ashmanskas from completely upstaging his production. Yes, the madly inventive actor is uproariously funny, he's just not in the same play, making him nearly worth the price of omission.

You can't blame Ashmanskas, since his character—pretentious young scribe Roland Maule—finds himself in a comedy almost bereft of humorous people. Victor Garber handles the central role of vain, aging stage idol Garry Essendine (a vehicle Coward built for himself) with kid gloves. And while the

seasoned actor has suavity, grace and a clipped, Cowardian delivery, his Essendine is far too considerate and restrained, too sane. As the fussy star's wry, put-upon secretary, Harriet Harris pitches her customary screwball, and Marc Vietor is Brylcreemed, pencil-mustachioed perfection as a high-strung director with a messy love life.

Alas, this overly polite revival's strengths vanish when Maule literally bounces onstage. Too old for the role (we must intuit that Maule lies about his age), Ashmanskas does endless variations on the twitchy, self-adulating popinjay; somehow he manages to smuggle a *grand jété* into a stage cross. Ashmanskas doesn't just steal the show; he locks it in a basement dungeon shackled to the wall and impregnates it repeatedly over 17 years. Such a power imbalance underscores Garber's and the production's general lack of comic nerve. Remediating that would require taking this splendidly funny play much more seriously.

—David Cote



FAN DANCE Eccentric admirer Ashmanskas, left, won't leave Garber alone.

PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN MARCUS (TOP LEFT, BOTTOM); CAROL ROSSIG (TOP RIGHT)

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