

"Six Degrees of Separation": ReAct explores the distance between us

By Roxanne Ray
Examiner Contributor

Networking—that interpersonal and technological word describing our connected lives in the 21st century—emphasizes the unlimited possibilities for links between seemingly discrete individuals. As Duncan Watts discusses in his 2003 book entitled "Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age," the Internet and advanced cell phone technology increase the closeness of the associations among the world's 6.6 billion people—far beyond the proximity popularly imagined when John Guare initially wrote "Six Degrees of Separation" in 1990.

But Guare's play, as illustrated in the title, is as much about distance as it is about nearness. The current production by Repertory Actors Theatre emphasizes this with a simple yet visually instructive, use of the front half of the Hugo House playing space. Guare's story begins in the New York City home of class-conscious Ouisa (Eloisa Cardona) and Flan (Dennis Kleinsmith), as they work over their wealthier business acquaintance Geoffrey (Jim Winkler) for a \$2 million investment that will save Flan's failing art-dealing livelihood.

Into this mix, in accordance with a classic "intruder" plot, comes Paul, played with skillful range by Joseph Mascarella. Appearing wounded from a mugging, Paul claims to know Ouisa and Flan's children Woody (Alexander Oki) and Tess (Miko Premo), whom we meet only much later. Ouisa and Flan administer first aid, and welcome Paul to join the group for dinner, for which they receive Paul's fabulous home cooking, as well as enchanting tales about Paul's father, Sidney Poitier.

It is only when Ouisa and Flan discover Paul ensconced with a Hustler in their home that the spell is broken, and they exile Paul from their dwelling. Their frustration is compounded when they learn from friends Kitty (Kathleen Ulrich) and Larkin (Jeffrey Wade Gilbert) that Paul has perpetrated the same scheme on a

number of their well-to-do friends.

To work as a manifestation of the ever-outwardly spreading web of personal contacts, this play's second half requires a strong ensemble of actors—which this production's cast of 18 generally provides. As Ouisa and Flans, Cardona and Kleinsmith are the linchpins of the show, displaying the necessary range of anxious surface "sparkle" (when pursuing cold hard cash) and passionate caring (for art, in Flan's case, or for Paul in Ouisa's—if not generally for each other). Complementing then, Ulrich and Gilbert succeed in conveying the petty jealousies and secrecies of a long-married couple. Travis Myers and Brooke Hills gently offer us the opposite: the sweet yet sharp naiveté of a young couple from Utah struggling to succeed in New York theatre.

As Geoffrey, Winkler captures with skill the calm security and lack of pretentiousness of the extreme wealthy, while the ensemble playing the younger generation exhibits the cynicism of youth, with its smirking tolerance of the parental elders. The remainder of the ensemble is slightly uneven, though all of the briefer glimpses of peripheral characters, such as the School Teacher (Lydia Vinson), the Hustler (Gordon Hendrickson), and the Policeman (Henry Drew), are strong enough so as not to detract from the experience of watching the central characters puzzle out this dilemma.

The production's set design, by director David Hsieh, aids the actors and audience in keeping the stage uncluttered by using two long diagonal walls, one on each side of the stage, each with several sliding doors that open to reveal a new character or location—and then close again to bring us right back to Ouisa and Flan's tasteful yet darkly-furnished living room.

These closet doors, with their incessant openings and closings, help illustrate the tenuousness of the bonds, near and far, that we try to create everyday. Despite the multiple valiant attempts by the older adults to reach out to Paul, to discover his true identity, and to (ostensibly) get him some help, true understanding remains sparse. Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation" demonstrates how even a surfeit of connections—through family relationships, through art, or through friendship—may fail to bridge the distance between us.

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PERFORMANCE

"Six Degrees of Separation": ReAct Theatre, through July 30. Richard Hugo House Theatre, 1634 11th Ave., Seattle. Tickets and info: (206) 364-3283 ext. 2