

A 'Country House' Divided *The Country House*, at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

By Terry Teachout

The backstage play, in which the private lives of theater people are put onstage for the world to see, is one of the diciest of dramatic genres. As much as those who work in the theater love seeing themselves turned into more or less fictional characters, such plays run to self-indulgence, and the truer to life they are, the less likely that “civilians” (the theater-world term for outsiders) will understand more than a sliver of the inside-baseball talk with which they’re typically salted. Not so “The Country House,” in which Donald Margulies shows us three tense days in the life of a theatrical family. **Far from being self-indulgent, it is one of the most disciplined and satisfying new American plays to reach Broadway in the past decade.**

“The Country House” is the kind of play that is too often dismissively described as “well made,” meaning that its structure is straightforward and its dramaturgy conventional (up to and including a stop-press surprise that rings down the second-act curtain with a gasp). Taking as his point of departure Chekhov’s “The Seagull,” Mr. Margulies presents us with six characters whose lives are so tightly interwoven that you all but need a chart to explain how they fit together:

- Anna (**Blythe Danner**) is a stage actress of the grande-dame species (“I am not one whose entrances go unnoticed”) who has come to the Williamstown Theatre Festival to play the title role in “Mrs. Warren’s Profession” and hold court in her family’s summer house, which is also the residence of
- Elliot (**Eric Lange**), her no-longer-young son, an unsuccessful, bitterly frustrated actor who saw Kathy, his late sister, through her final illness a year ago and has now decided to try his hand at writing a play that proves (this isn’t the surprise) to be perfectly dreadful.
- Walter (**David Rasche**), Kathy’s widowed husband, is a late-middle-aged former stage director who now makes trashy movies for teenagers (his latest effort is called “Truck Stop IV”). He has just gotten engaged to



PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

Sarah Steele, Eric Lange and Blythe Danner in *The Country House*

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- Nell (**Kate Jennings Grant**), his much younger girlfriend, a very pretty but only modestly successful movie actress (“I went from ‘Hot Neighbor’ to ‘Single Mom’ seemingly overnight”) with whom Elliot was once in unrequited love.
- Susie (**Sarah Steele**), the 19-year-old daughter of Walter and Kathy, is a brainy Yalie who claims to despise actors and their ways but nonetheless has a hopeless crush on
- Michael (**Daniel Sunjata**), a good-looking TV star and longtime friend of the family who is doing penance for his recent success in Hollywood by spending the summer acting for peanuts (“The Williamstown Cure: Better than a high colonic!”).

Put them all in the same country house and you have a surefire formula for friction. **But Mr. Margulies makes it new by portraying their collective difficulties with just the right mixture of honesty and sympathy.** And while they fire off plenty of zingy one-liners and comebacks, the fact that they are theater people (as opposed to, say, football players) draws the sting from their glibness and makes it believable.

I was especially impressed by the accuracy with which Mr. Margulies has sketched Susie. He has a well-tuned ear for the niceties of millennial speech, and the greatly but unassumingly gifted Ms. Steele takes full advantage of its precision.

You have no trouble believing Mr. Lange when he tells his troubles to anyone who will listen: “I’m ready to give up acting. Well, that’s not entirely accurate. In order to give up acting I have to have been acting. But announcing that I’m ready to give up auditioning doesn’t have quite the same impact.” And when he stops cracking jokes and admits to his pain, you feel every bit of it along with him.

To single out Ms. Steele and Mr. Lange is not, however, to suggest that their colleagues are less than excellent. They are, in fact, uniformly superior, and Daniel Sullivan has staged the play with an ungimmicky simplicity that allows each one to shine in turn—but it is the author who makes them real. If “The Country House” is a backstage drama by virtue of its setting, its actual subject is how the members of a close family can hurt one another without meaning to do so. You needn’t have done time on the far side of the proscenium to know all about that, to recognize how fully Mr. Margulies understands it or to appreciate the seasoned skill with which he has turned that hurt into the stuff of a truly affecting play.

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