



# CAPE COD TIMES

## ACTRESS-DIRECTOR DWYER DELIVERS WITH 'DINING ROOM'

By Caitlin Malone, *Cape Cod Times*

What a difference an actress can make. At least, that's the case when that actress is as self-controlled and thoughtful as Sr. Danielle Dwyer is in the Elements Theatre Company's production of "The Dining Room."

Granted, A.R. Gurney's script is worth experiencing for its own sake. Over the course of 18 distinct scenes, only connected to one another by the titular dining room setting, Gurney explores how upper-class traditions like the family meal have evolved, or possibly devolved, over the last century.

The play is constantly changing. Tonally, characters and scenes shift from comedic and lighthearted to morose within seconds, as a scene about the absurd consequences of an insult heard at the club is followed by a scene between a father and son discussing the father's funeral wishes.

Likewise, varying perspectives between young and old, baby boomer and Gen-Yer determine whether the dark mahogany dining table feels imposing or inviting. This narrative flexibility in Gurney's script provides an opportunity for his audience to reexamine the dining room that grounds those scenes and determine whether this institution is something we've lost or something from which we've freed ourselves.

The difficulty that attends such a loosely tied together play that lacks a through-line or stable cast of characters is getting the audience to feel emotionally invested. Gurney's script is only able to touch on the complex emotional lives of his characters in the few minutes that it presents each character.

Thus, whether the audience does actually connect with the performance is ultimately up to the cast and crew producing the show, and for the most part, this production by the Elements Theatre Company succeeds. The interior design team of Camie Ford, Lara McKendree, Michelle Rich and Anne Swidrak has created a dining room that despite its outdated

trappings is warm and appealing. The seven actors who compose the entire cast tackle the more than 50 roles, and they do so with great ease. Brad Lussier follows up his turn as the imposing father determined to preserve the sanctity of the breakfast table with a surprisingly understated performance as a young boy trying to convince the maid not to move out of his house. The cast members clearly care for their characters and are enjoyable to watch.

Yet it is Dwyer, who is also the show's director, who makes this performance a must see. She gives each of the nine characters she plays their own distinct voices. Even as she dons the airs of the upper-class housewife in more than a few scenes, she finds what makes each of them individual. What could have been a stereotypical scene between a housewife experiencing unexpected sparks with the local handyman inspecting her dining room table is given a more joyful, innocent aura by Dwyer's playful performance. And this production's crowning scene, between a mother suffering from dementia and her grown children on Thanksgiving, is given its emotional heft by Dwyer's turn as the mother. From the tiniest twitch of her eye to her stiff gait, Dwyer plays this part with such painful humanity, and delivers a punch to the gut with her simple yet mournful delivery.

As the director of this performance, Dwyer has assembled a committed and capable cast and crew to bring Gurney's evocative script to life. As an actress within it, she makes it a memorable experience.

# The Barnstable Patriot

## DINING ROOM FURNISHES OPPORTUNITIES FOR TALENTED CAST

Written by John Watters, *Barnstable Patriot*

A.R. Gurney's play *The Dining Room* is a story of the culture of that pedigreed demographic, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Swimming in waters that they are quite familiar with, the talented Elements Theater ensemble makes a splash with Gurney's "comedy of manners" with more than 50 characters playing out 18 scenes in the two-act play.

*Dining Room* opened on Broadway in 1981 and since then it has been the darling of theater groups of all levels. That's partially because it's a one-room set, and secondly because it gives actors plenty of opportunity to work their craft, albeit a narrow window which offers glimpses of what is lately becoming a dying breed, America's upper-middle class. Gurney himself is a product of that cohort. Raised in the golden era of Buffalo, N.Y. in its industrial heyday, he was schooled at St. Paul's School in New Hampshire, Williams College, and Yale School of Drama, ending up teaching humanities at MIT before gaining enough success with his playwriting to make that his fulltime profession. His other works include *Love Letters*, *Sylvia*, *The Cocktail Hour*, and *Indian Blood*.

*The Dining Room* lets the audience in on the inner machinations of 18 families that own the home in which the stately dining room and its elegant appointments have sat for close to 80 years. The concept is that this room, in which families have come together to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner in everyday settings and celebrate special occasions and holidays, is essentially the epicenter through good times and bad, proud moments and awkward ones. It is a play about humanity, which is Gurney's specialty.

Director Sr. Danielle Dwyer has once again rounded up the usual suspects that make up The Elements Theater Company, the theatrical arm of Gloriam Dei Artes Foundation of the Community of Jesus. Rachel McKendree, Kate Shannon, Chris Kanaga, Luke Norman, Brad Lussier, Peter Haig and Dwyer herself portray Gurney's characters that range in age from young children to the very old. Each of the talented players make each personae change seamless; all easily banter the witty dialog back and forth like a shuttlecock in a badminton game.

Many of the highlights of this Elements production come with the players who play children. In the scene called “Eat Together,” Sr. Dwyer and Brad Lussier as the mother and father, with Kate Shannon and Peter Haig as their children, show the age battle of table manners and children being seen and not heard.

Also delightful is the scene called “Winkie’s Birthday” in which the young friends of Winkie (Kate Shannon) are portrayed by McKendree, Kanaga, Norman, and Haig. The adult actors capture the childlike qualities of voice and body language of their young characters with aplomb.

The final scene, in which the room is decorated in a formal dining format with all coming together to cheer each other’s lives and accomplishments, is also well done.

The dining room set designed by Steve Minster and Peter Shannon is beautifully rendered, and in the close confines of the company’s theater the audience gets the feel of being on the stage with the actors.

For those who love Gurney, this Elements production is a must see; for those who aren’t as familiar with his work, one couldn’t do better to get a taste of his work.



# 'The Dining Room' serves up a night to remember

## THEATER Review

By Ellen Petry Whalen

For decades, middle-class Americans have been losing financial ground, and with that loss, a ceremonious way of life is vanishing.

Elements Theatre Company's "The Dining Room" deliciously serves up food for thought on this subject, focusing specifically on the declining, upper middle class, white Anglo Saxon Protestant population, and how the role of their formal dining room, and all of its functions, have mirrored America's societal changes, for better and worse, over the years.

The 1981 comedy of manners was written by the American playwright A. R. Gurney, and it appears, having attended a New England prep school, Williams College and the Yale School of Drama, that Gurney has had a taste of the WASP lifestyle first hand.

The intriguing play is a mixture of vignettes that not only fluidly focus on different time periods non-linearly, but independently overlap on stage, with six gifted, adult actors playing 52 roles, varying in age from young children to seniors, as they play out stirring storylines that unfold as beginnings, endings or something in the middle. To complicate matters, there are also an impressive number of costume changes



G. Luke Norman, Kate Shannon, Rachel McKendree, and Peter Haig in a scene from "The Dining Room."

(designed by JoAnne Laraja and Charity Spatzbeck-Olsen) woven into the mix too.

Under director Sister Danielle Dwyer's watchful eye, the familiar actors in this tight ensemble run with the insightful and witty script, fully developing it with their impressive attention to detail, giving each character subtle yet dramatic nuances, while never missing a line between the numerous characters, as they give a glimpse into 18 different dining rooms and the families' lives that evolve in and around the formal room.

In one role, Brad Lussier plays a stern, pompous and ritualistic, post-

Victorian era father, who takes the role of head of the household to the dictatorial level. As his unassuming, yet inquisitiveness son, Peter Haig embodies the small boy's struggle to be respectful of a father he fears, while he tries to make sense of a world that is not as black and white as his wealthy father presents. As a modern daughter, Rachel McKendree desperately seeks her father's approval to move back home with her children, after a failed marriage and a couple of adulterous affairs. Her father, played by Luke Norman, who years earlier faced a similar predicament himself, tries to avoid the heart-felt conversation, preferring to

focus on his afternoon scotch. Sister Danielle Dwyer skillfully transforms herself from an adorably impetuous youth at a lively birthday party into a haunting portrayal of a grandmother with Alzheimer's. In one of the last scenes, Kate Shannon embodies the pomp and circumstance of dated, formal dining rituals when she animatedly demonstrates to her nephew how to swish one's digits in a finger bowl, in preparation for the next course.

As usual, the set at Elements Theatre is the icing on the cake and the dining room (designed by Steve Minster and Peter Shannon) is in such a natural and elegant-looking state, that just for a second, as I rounded the corner of the ground-level, flexible stage, I mistook it for a real one. My 12-year-old daughter more succinctly observed it looked like it was "chopped out" of a stately home and "plopped" into place, making it an ideal setting for a provocative drama that forces one to consider how the loss of formal family meals, is a measure of progress or decline in our modern society.

### If you go...

**What:** "The Dining Room"

**Where:** Elements Theatre Company, ParacleteHouse, Rock Harbor, Orleans

**When:** Friday, Saturday, 7:30 p.m.; Sunday, 3 p.m., until May 27

**Tickets:** \$30 adults, \$25 seniors, free 18 and under. Call 508-240-2400



26 may THE DINING ROOM Elements Theatre Company PARACLETE HOUSE, Orleans

Um, this may have been the most pampered, most exhilarating, most nourishing 19 and 1/2 hours of my life --- to date. And I have the people around the Elements Theatre Company at The Community of Jesus, Rock Harbor, Orleans to thank for it all. Let me try to explain:

First of all, a member of the Community in Boston on family business picked me up here and drove me there, and then back the next day. I was fed a light dinner and an excellent breakfast, spent the night in a hotel-style bed-and-breakfast room, saw a show and discussed it and wider theatrical matters at length with its director and assistant-director --- and all despite the fact that I told their p/r person I probably couldn't review the play, which I saw on its penultimate performance (though it may tour). Everything was done, pleasantly and with no pressure, by people some of whom were members of "an ecumenical monastic order (<http://www.communityofjesus.org/>) on the Benedictine model --- and the word "God" was mentioned only once --- by Me!

Astonishing.

They're only recently trying to get the notice of reviewers here in Boston, and I had never heard of them, but they've been doing shows, and studying theater, for twenty years, and some of the 16-person core company were Founding Members. When they were doing Shakespeare they went to London to study. This year they'd like to know more about improv so they'll be in Chicago for a month. Their "Cherry Orchard" had 27 actors; "The Dining Room" had a cast of seven playing 51 different characters, from children to Alzheimer's and everything in between, in 18 seamless episodic vignettes over 50 years. And the whole thing was marvelously good.

They rehearsed, twice a week, two months for this show, occasionally asking others to rehearse a scene, and they plan to tour it to colleges and high schools, because A.R.Gurney's Republican W.A.S.P.s and their very human world and experiences are worth understanding. They're doing an Ibsen ("The Pillars of Society") in January, and maybe a classic Spanish play after that. Some actors also play in their marching-band, that wins contests (one last year in South Korea I hear) and went to South Africa taking a load of instruments to distribute, free, to kids.

The play was done in a big space with the title prop across one side, about a hundred or so seats on moveable risers on the other. Characters appeared and disappeared through two doors --- as directed by the script --- shedding or acquiring years and costumes in moments. The eighteen vignettes, like pearls in a necklace, flipped back and forth in time, but everywhere the centered calm of people who Know Who They Are tended to file off any rough edges as fifty years of family stories rolled past. The Director & Artistic Director (Sister Danielle Dwyer CJ) played nine different women, A.D and Technical Director Christopher Kanaga only seven men --- but six to nine per actor was the norm. Despite some distance from the crowd, in a big room, I heard every word and felt every emotion.

I suspect My god --- Thespis --- was pleased.  
I certainly was.

Larry Stark  
2012