



# 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design team of Camie Ford, Lara McKendree, Michelle Rich and Anne Swidrak has created a dining room that despite its outdated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.