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### The Common Pursuit

by Daniel Scheffler  
EDGE Contributor  
Monday May 21, 2012

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Tim McGeever and Lucas Near-Verbrugge in "The Common Pursuit" (Source: Joan Marcus)

**"The Common Pursuit"** is a play by Simon Gray that trails the entangled and tricky lives of six friends, almost 'frenemies'. The title is an allusion to F.R. Leavis's collection of essays, critiqued to be 'too serious', entitled "Scrutiny: The Common Pursuit," written in 1952 and the play tries hard to carry this seriousness with some merit. The effect is an almost funny two hours of theatre with very few moments of hilariousness primarily exploring wit in the most superficial way.

The so-called gang meets each other as undergraduates at the University of Cambridge under the premise of starting a new snobby literary magazine called "The Common Pursuit." The script gives each character their own sense of false hope, complete disillusion about their ability and so the pursuit of dreams run forth as the play unfolds.

Moisés Kaufman directs the version currently running Off-Broadway at the Laura Pels Theatre, and the play opens with great potential of clever humor and absolute English dryness but as it slowly develops the wit dries up quickly with not much of an after taste.

The male characters are all introduced to each other formally in the dorm room of Stuart Thorne (Josh Cooke) where he had just started to make love to his girl, Marigold (Kristen Bush) when they all arrive one after the other.

The only female, Bush, lacks true emotion and her character cannot come alive as she disconnects from the audience and her fellow actors. The scene reveals the character flaws in each of the six, shown as almost caricatures, and hints smartly at the destruction that is bound to follow. Unfortunately the six actors cannot bring the script up for air and it somehow feels as if they, and the script, have been locked in the basement.

The first to arrive is neurotic Martin (Jacob Fishel) who has the amazing ability to say all the wrong things at exactly the wrong times, his life long ambition is to work in publishing and his family wealth is what affords him this dream.

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Humphry (Tim McGeever) is next to arrive with an air of complete self-righteousness and so naturally wants to be a philosophy professor ("professorship is all I can do in a philosophy direction"). Tim McGeever lacks a true ease of character and too well rehearsed lines gives the character a flatness that could have been avoided.

The most entertaining of the characters, Nick (Lucas Near-Verbrugge), stumbles into the dorm with a hangover, theatrical hand movements, cigarettes ("herbal," according to sign outside the theatre) and an aspiration to be a theatre critic.

Nick manages to give the best performance of the group as he dishes some well-executed pushes all around. The last to arrive is the proverbial Captain America character Peter (Kieran Campion) that reminisces about bedroom adventures with various girls and seemingly has no other interests.

The play quickly jumps 20 years ahead and shows how the magazine has reached a rather unsuccessful status with some major debts. The semi-enjoyable twists in the plot are light and feel superficial with a range of happenings like divorces, marriages, births, deaths, homosexual explorations and some work victories.

But none of these matter enough for audiences to sympathize or relate to the characters. The melodrama feels not melodramatic enough to have impact, and barely allows the actors to truly come undone if they wanted to and perhaps should have.

The design team that includes Clint Ramos (costumes), David Lander (lights) and Derek McLane (sets), creates an almost believable English scene with problems like the wine that doesn't match its bottle.

The moments of astute script shows off the characters' inability to remain committed to themselves, their life goals and everything else that comes into the cross fire. The themes of loyalty, betrayal, love and hate come to the fore but somehow with a cast of actors missing the rhythm of stage it refuses to enthrall.

*"The Common Pursuit" runs through July 29 at the Laura Pels Theatre, 111 West 46th St. For info or tickets visit <http://www.roundabouttheatre.org/tickets/reserve.aspx?pid=11695>*

Daniel Scheffler is a writer who spends his time in New York, Cape Town and India. Follow him on Twitter @danielscheffler

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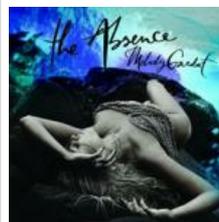
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