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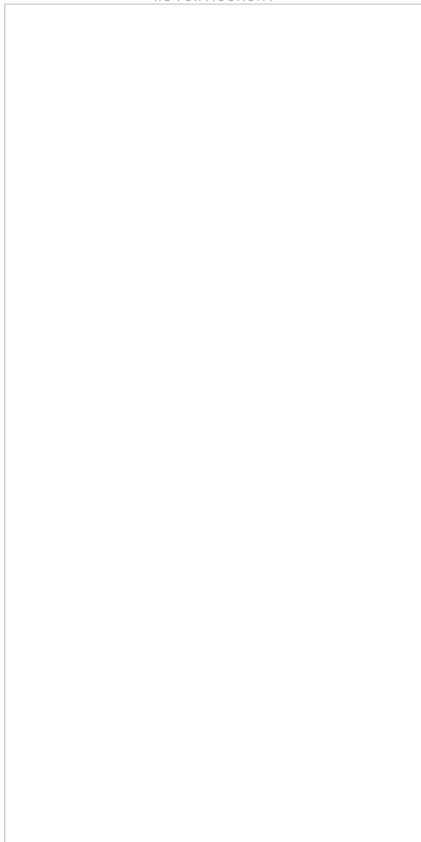
'The Dining Room' offers tasty slices of life

BY ANN HICKS • ARTS WRITER • JUNE 7, 2009

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One day past his birthday, Center Stage guest director Benjamin P. Robinson takes a break from munching on a slice of leftover chocolate cake to talk about "The Dining Room," the final production of the theater's 2008-2009 season.

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The Pulitzer-nominated play was a Broadway hit in the 1980s and brought playwright A.R. Gurney long-due critical and commercial success. Robinson says he thinks Centre Stage audiences also will find it a tasty feast when it opens Thursday for a three-week run.

Set entirely in a well-appointed dining room, the layered-play has 60 characters fielded by six actors – three women and three men – whose lives have but one thing in common: the dining room of a typical WASP family. The menu, on the other hand, samples relationships, family tensions, humor and sexual dalliances as Gurney slices and dices the privileged classes' sappy behavior.

Robinson's approach is to offer the play more as a "museum piece," because if you think about it, he says, formal dining rooms are such mid-20th century relics. Today's designers and builders have pretty much transformed the dining room into a different kind of place where the family now gathers. "It's no longer used as we remember it, where lots of family drama simmered over food," he says.

What makes "The Dining Room" accessible to today's audiences are its characters and stories, which are as much a mirror on "everyday people like we are" as it is about the privileged class, Robinson says. The touching themes probe the quests and the joys across all ages, from teen to a grandmother in dementia. Gurney is great at capturing in small vignettes slender slices of life, says the director, recalling his own family's use of the dining room in which special occasions called

for his grandmother's best china and crystal.

The actor-driven play is an excellent showcase for talented performers, Robinson says, adding that his cast is more than meeting the challenge. They're not playing stock characters, but finely-chiseled real people with emphasis on "real," he says.

The show is not only entertaining, Robinson says, but it also offer audiences a backward glance at their own memories centered on the dining room.

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Actors from left, Christopher Evans, Anne Elizabeth Butler, Allen Evans, Cindy Mixon, Katybeth Cassell and Jeff Warren, rehearse a scene in "The Dining Room," which opens at Centre Stage on Thursday. (OWEN RILEY JR./Staff)



"The Dining Room" follows 60 characters, played by six actors, through life's stages. From left are Allen Evans, Christopher Evans, Jeff Warren, Anne Elizabeth Butler, Katybeth Cassell and Cindy Mixon. (OWEN RILEY JR./Staff)



In A.R. Gurney's "The Dining Room," family drama plays out as characters interact in a single room. (OWEN RILEY/Staff)

YOU CAN GO

- What: A.R. Gurney's "The Dining Room"
- When: 8 p.m. June 11-13, 18-20, 25-27; 3 p.m. June 14 and 21
- Where: Centre Stage, 501 River St. Tickets: \$25; box office hours are 2-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday and 2 hours prior to curtain time
- Information: 233-6733