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‘Broadway Bound’ Review: Searching for Neil Simon

The show about family and its discontents, long missing from the Great White Way, gets a boost from a solid cast in Vermont.



Anthony Ingargiola and Robbie Rencigno in ‘Broadway Bound’ PHOTO: ERIKA FLORIANI

By

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Neil Simon has disappeared from Broadway, a street that he used to own. Only one of his plays, the 2005 Nathan Lane-Matthew Broderick revival of “The Odd Couple,” has had a successful run there in the past decade and a half. For this

reason, I've spent the past few seasons seeking out regional revivals of Mr. Simon's plays in an attempt to learn how they're holding up now that fashions in comedy have changed. That's what brought me to Vermont last week to see "Broadway Bound," whose David Cromer-directed 2009 Broadway revival was canceled due to lack of interest—and you know what? It turns out to be a *very* strong piece of work, one of the most impressive of the more-or-less autobiographical plays in which Mr. Simon portrayed the splendors and miseries of his youth with a potent blend of harsh candor and honest sentiment.



Amy Hayes, Richard Howe, Sarah Corey in 'Broadway Bound' PHOTO: ERIKA FLORIANI

Oldcastle Theatre Company, a 46-year-old troupe headquartered in a 120-seat theater in downtown Bennington, is giving "Broadway Bound" an unusually effective staging by Eric Peterson, one that profits from the presence of a rock-solid cast. All six members are wholly believable in the roles of Eugene (Anthony J. Ingargiola), Simon's fictional alter ego, and the extended family with which he

lived in deepest Brooklyn. Best of all—if only by an inch or two—is Sarah Corey, who plays Eugene’s mother, a once-lively Jewish hausfrau whose spirit has been battered by the slow crumbling of her marriage to an angry, dark-souled husband (Jason Asprey) who is seeing another woman on the side. But everyone in this production is distinguished, as is Carl Sprague’s two-tiered set, a rewardingly detailed evocation of New York apartment life in the ’40s.

Like most of Simon’s later plays, “Broadway Bound” is marred by the gratuitous use of a first-person narrator—it isn’t really a full-fledged “Glass Menagerie”-style memory play—and a tendency to jokiness that undercuts its astringency of tone. Lines like “I don’t trust affection...sometimes people give it to you instead of the truth” sit uneasily alongside what Frank Rich called the “Broadway realism” of the comic scenes in his review of the original 1986 Broadway production. Here as in Mr. Simon’s other late plays, I came away feeling that he lacked the artistic courage that might have made it possible for him to throw away the Borscht Belt punchlines of his early Broadway triumphs and try his hand at writing the unsparing family drama that he so clearly had in him.

Be that as it may, “Broadway Bound” is not short on frankness, and Mr. Peterson never lets his actors take the easy way out and lean on the laughs. This “Broadway Bound” is played for truth all the way—and Mr. Simon’s truths about family life and its discontents sting like the lashes of a knotted rope.

—*Mr. Teachout is the Journal’s drama critic. “Billy and Me,” his new play, opens at Palm Beach Dramaworks on Dec. 8. Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.*