

It's lion vs. Christian in Nora Theatre's 'Saving Kitty'



A.R. Sinclair Photography

Alexander Cook and Jennifer Coolidge in "Saving Kitty."

By Jeffrey Gantz Globe Correspondent July 15, 2015

CAMBRIDGE — The time is now, the place is a Fifth Avenue apartment in Manhattan, and the game is “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?,” as Kate and Huntley wait to see what kind of prospective husband their only daughter, Kitty, is bringing home. They’d be OK, they aver, with a black son-in-law. Paul, however, turns out to be an evangelical Christian from Virginia, and that has Kate, at least, wondering whether Kitty doesn’t need saving from her intended and his church.

Marisa Smith’s comedy, which premiered at Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater in 2012, was a little fluffy in its original incarnation, but it’s been improved since, and the Nora Theatre Company production at Central Square Theater is so beautifully directed, acted, and presented that you could mistake the play for Noël Coward.

The good news starts with Steven Royal’s extravagant set, which conveys the opulence of an Upper East Side flat: a foyer as well as a sitting room, a creditable Manhattan skyline outside the picture windows, chair-rail molding everywhere, elegant furniture (including a leather ottoman),

a sideboard with high-end alcohol, lots of modern art, and an oil portrait, pointedly lit by John R. Malinowski, that looks just like Lydia Barnett-Mulligan, the actress who plays Kitty. Barbara Douglass's costume palette encompasses both Victoria's Secret lingerie and a bright blue burqa.

As they wait for Kitty and Paul to arrive, Kate and Huntley sample a 20-year-old Bordeaux ("A hint of pencil lead") and debate whether Sidney Poitier or Harry Belafonte has the darker complexion. Huntley is the director of public information at the United Nations; Kate played town kleptomaniac Mary Davenport on the TV soap "As the World Turns." They're concerned for their daughter: Dartmouth graduate Kitty is the producer of a TV news program, and Kate thinks she should have her own show, "like Diane Sawyer or Katie Couric."

The first act of "Saving Kitty" — the play runs 2½ hours with one intermission — presents Paul as an infomercial for evangelicals, who, he explains, are not all fundamentalists. Paul has a PhD in education from UCLA, he believes in evolution, and his church has named him principal of a school it's opening in the Bronx. Still, that doesn't stop Kate from coming at him like a lion eyeing an early Christian. She swivels between hugely intelligent and weirdly obtuse, but she's "on stage" every second, and when she calls former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "I'm-a-Dinner-Jacket" or asks what a vegan is, you wonder whether it's not all part of an act.

It's a demanding role, in any case, and Massachusetts native Jennifer Coolidge, best known for her appearances in the "American Pie" and "Legally Blonde" film franchises, does full justice to it. Nora artistic director Lee Mikeska Gardner, who helms this production, gives her plenty of room, and Coolidge takes it, displaying superb comic timing when, for example, the burqa comes off and she says, "I'm born again!"

Her three costars hold their own. Alexander Cook offers a professorial, laptop-obsessed Huntley whose mind seems perpetually at the office — where he has a secret. Cook also does a mean pileated-woodpecker call. Barnett-Mulligan's perky, giddy, eyelash-batting Kitty is totally taken with herself in a totally infectious way. And Lewis D. Wheeler's Paul is a model of open-mindedness and Southern charm, unfazed by Kate's most outrageously loaded questions. "Saving Kitty" may preach tolerance in religion, but its real subject is relationships, where tolerance is a saving grace.

Stage Review

SAVING KITTY

Play by Marisa Smith

Directed by

Lee Mikeska Gardner

Set, Steven Royal. Lights, John R. Malinowski. Costumes, Barbara Douglass.

Presented by

Nora Theatre Company

At: Central Square Theater, Cambridge, through Aug. 2. Tickets: \$15-\$74. 866-811-4111,
www.centalsquaretheater.org

Jeffrey Gantz can be reached at jeffreymgantz@gmail.com.

Behind the Scene: Interior decorating at ‘Saving Kitty’



A.R. Sinclair

By Terry Byrne Globe Correspondent July 23, 2015

What: The opulent-looking set of Nora Theatre Company’s “Saving Kitty.”

Where: “Saving Kitty” runs through Aug. 2 at the Central Square Theater, Cambridge.

A hand-carved Nepali soldier, a utility god from Colombia, and some Balinese batik temple dancers are among the lavish but tasteful artworks displayed on the walls of the Upper East Side apartment where the comedy “Saving Kitty” is set.

The set reflects the sensibilities of the fictional couple who occupy it. “Huntley Hartley works for the United Nations,” says Joe Stallone, properties manager for the Nora Theatre Company production. “The living room, where the action takes place, is where his wife, Kate, plays hostess. The room needed to reflect their international taste without being too cluttered.”

Marisa Smith’s romantic comedy revolves around the much-awaited visit of Kitty, the Hartleys’ grown daughter, who is bringing her boyfriend home to meet her parents for the first time. When Kitty’s mother, Kate, played by Jennifer Coolidge, decides the boyfriend is not suitable, she goes to great lengths to quash the relationship.

After set designer Steven Royal sent a blueprint for the stage, Stallone says he collaborated with director Lee Mikeska Gardner to start forming a back story for the Hartleys' lives in their home.

"We rented furniture from the Cambridge-based CORT Furniture so that it would look like it all went together," Stallone says. "But I found the lamps on Craigslist."

As they considered how to decorate the walls, Stallone said, "Let's go shopping at my house."

All of the international artwork is from his personal collection, which he has gathered from his own travels and from finds he's made during his career as a props manager, director, and dramaturg in the Boston area.

The one prominent item that didn't come from Stallone's collection is the "oil painting of Kitty that looks like it was painted for her debutante party."

"We were going to have a family portrait on the wall," says Stallone, "but Lydia Barnett-Mulligan [who plays Kitty] brought in several pictures of herself. When we saw the one with white gloves and a dress with poofy sleeves, we knew what to do."

Some Photoshop tweaks, and software that adds elements to make photos look like oil paintings, and the photo was transformed into an elegant portrait of a daughter whose parents have put her on a pedestal.

"Although the set dressing looks quite lavish, because we were creative, we stayed within the Nora Theatre's budget," says Stallone.

Terry Byrne can be reached at trbyrne@aol.com.

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Saving Kitty

July 23, 2015

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Play (2013)
by Marisa Smith

Directed by Lee Mikeska Gardner

Scenic Design: Steven Royal

The *Nora* Theatre Company
Central Square Theater, Cambridge
July 9 – August 2, 2015

With Jennifer Coolidge (Kate Hartley), Lydia Barnett-Mulligan (Kitty Hartley), Alexander Cook (Huntley Hartley), Lewis D. Wheeler (Paul Cook)



Jennifer Coolidge as Kate Hartley
in “Saving Kitty”
Photo: Courtesy of Central Square Theater

A very funny portrayal of an outrageous mother trying to undermine her daughter’s new relationship with a born-again Christian.

Kitty (Lydia Barnett Mulligan), a broadcaster in her mid-twenties, comes home to her parents in New York with her new serious boyfriend, Paul (Lewis D. Wheeler). Shortly after arriving, it becomes apparent that Paul is a born-again Christian, which does not sit easily with Kitty’s parents, Kate (Jennifer Coolidge) or Huntley (Alexander Cook), though clearly Kate is far more agitated about it than Huntley is. So begins Kate’s one woman campaign to break up the relationship. Meanwhile, things not so heavenly in Kate’s and Huntley’s marriage rise to the surface while Kate undertakes to challenge the appearances of heavenliness in her daughter’s relationship with Paul.

Jennifer Coolidge, featured prominently in Christopher Guest’s wonderful mockumentaries *Best in Show* (2000) and *A Mighty Wind* (2003), is a total scream in this well written and directed comedy of manners. An adept actress as well as a talented clown, she manages to convey the heartfelt core of her character while creating one outrageous scene after the next. Her capacity to be so unabashedly wild gives the role, and the performance, its wonderful charm.

Part she-devil, part devoted mother, Kate aims to poke as many holes in Paul’s shiny exterior as she

possibly can. At once subtle and blustery, suggestive and bombastic, she releases any number of sallies. Some emerge through innuendo, some through straight talk, but whatever the vehicle, she comes down on the side of earthy realism, strong medicine for Paul's narrow and self-righteous intensity. Much of the very funny dialogue involves long interchanges between Kate and Paul, much involving her subtle and direct attacks upon him. When Paul eventually begins to show cracks, Kate is there to egg him on.

In a great talk-back after the show, playwright Smith noted that she got the germinating idea for the play when she encountered conservative evangelical Christians in Hanover, NH, otherwise a center of secular liberalism. She created out of that germ encounter a wild comedy that evokes an unexpected poignancy. The writing is outrageously funny without feeling contrived, and its tone fits in extremely well with Coolidge's talent for being hilarious without seeming to force laughs.

As well in the talk-back, Coolidge said that when she read the play initially – given to her by, as she put it, a friend of a friend of a friend – she was really attracted to the strong and interesting female lead, but felt that when she and playwright Smith got together to talk that a sense of enthusiasm for the project really emerged. She said she loved to really develop her character's capacity to taunt Paul, and enjoyed the freedom of the stage to enable her to do that freely.

The play clearly relies on a series of caricatures, Coolidge's Kate the most vivid of these, daring protocol at every turn, making outrageous comments that one barely believes possible. A little like Mae West in her outspokenness and sensual glee, but thrust into a more dramatic situation, she maintains her capacity to deliver wit-filled sallies under trying circumstances.

The other characters are solid straight men and women for the glowingly bad Kate.

Lydia Barnett-Mulligan is an energetic and enthralled Kitty, traveling from buttoned down and prim to looser and more robustly easygoing with seeming ease.

Lewis D. Wheeler is an effective Paul, straightlaced and austere on arrival and showing more vulnerabilities as time winds down.

Alexander Cook as Huntley Hartley – only a comic writer could come up with that name – is stodgy and evasive enough to provide a nice foil to Kate.

Direction by Lee Mikeska Gardner is most effective overall.

The scenic design by Steven Royal is really spectacular for this small venue, conveying a quite delineated and varied space, inventively angled.

– BADMan



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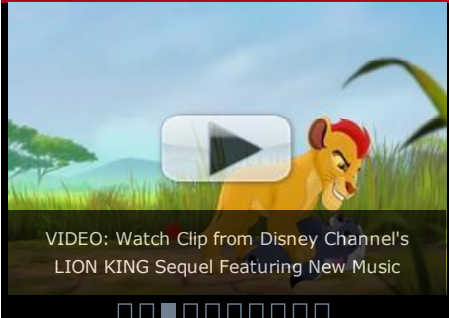
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by Jan Nargi

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Written by Marisa Smith; directed by Lee Mikeska Gardner; scenic design, Steven Royal; costume design, Barbara Douglass; lighting design, John R. Malinowski; sound design, Jennifer Timms

Cast in Order of Appearance:

Kate Hartley, Jennifer Coolidge; Huntley Hartley, Alexander Cook; Kitty Hartley, Lydia Barnett-Mulligan; Paul Cook, Lewis D. Wheeler

Performances and Tickets:

Now through August 2, The Nora Theatre Company at Central Square Theater, 450 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, Mass.; tickets start at \$20 and are available online at www.CentralSquareTheater.org or by calling the Box Office at 617-576-9278.

Stars as the devastatingly funny Kate Hartley, a smart but frustrated society matron who's bound and determined to save her daughter Kitty (Lydia Barnett-Mulligan) from the kind of stifling marriage she has had with Huntley (Alexander Cook), a UN political strategist who's more tuned into his emails and text messages than he is to his flesh-and-blood wife.

When Kitty brings her soon-to-be fiancé Paul (Lewis D. Wheeler) home to meet the parents, it doesn't take long for Kate to turn her abundant pent-up hostilities on him. Concerned not only that Paul is a born-again Christian but also that Kitty has decided to leave her job as a rising television news writer to help Paul found a K-12 Christian school in the Bronx, Kate uses all her wiles to scuttle the relationship. Alternating devilishly between saboteur and seductress, Coolidge as Kate feigns a charming innocence all the while spewing out invectives like an industrial strength wood chipper. She leaves no sacred cow unskewered, but her utter lack of political correctness is so guileless that her insults land like simple, if hilarious, truths.


In lesser hands playwright Marisa Smith's scathing comedy could be lost in its familiar storyline, but director Lee Mikeska Gardner and her nimble cast have elevated the material to a riotous level. Without an ounce of force or pretention, Coolidge and company are laugh-out-loud funny. The surprise is that they are also often touching.



Coolidge, especially, reveals the emptiness beneath the bravado - not in any grand gesture but with the simple power of a pause or a sigh. As Kate she applies her trademark tough-tender vulnerability to deliver a complex woman who is

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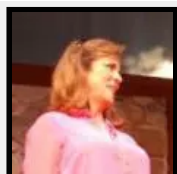
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as deeply feeling as she is uproariously offensive. Her barbs are her protection, and her smile is both a weapon and a mask.

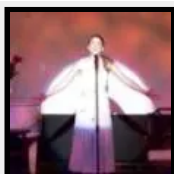
SAVING KITTY doesn't necessarily say anything new about politics, religion, or relationships, but what it does say is deliciously uncensored. And thanks to Coolidge, who coats Kate's acid tongue with just the right amount of sugar substitute, **SAVING KITTY** is wickedly funny, as well.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NORA THEATRE COMPANY: Alexander Cook as Huntley Hartley and Jennifer Coolidge as Kate Hartley; Lewis D. Wheeler as Paul Cook and Jennifer Coolidge

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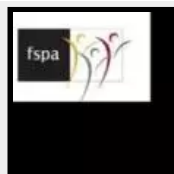
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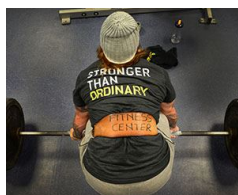
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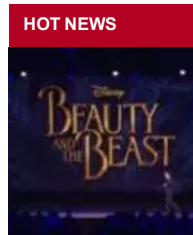
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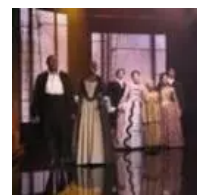


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THEATER: SAVING KITTY

JOYCE KULHAWIK JULY 23, 2015 0



Don't wait another minute to get a ticket to the funniest show in town right now: Marisa Smith's "SAVING KITTY" presented by the Nora Theatre Company at Central Square Theater and

starring Boston's own divine Jennifer Coolidge, star of Film (breakthrough role: "American Pie" as Stifler's infamous mom), TV ("2 Broke Girls"), and the Broadway stage ("The Women").

The actress is a riot, unlike anyone else, and I couldn't take my eyes off her. An atom bomb could have gone off, and I would have clung to her every word, look, gesture, as if my life depended on it. I haven't had this much delicious fun at the theater in awhile.

In SAVING KITTY, Coolidge is both divine and diabolically ditz as Manhattanite Kate Hartley. She and husband Huntley (Alexander Cook) a UN official are awaiting the arrival of daughter Kitty who's bringing her new beau home for dinner. We learn that he is one of a string of recent beaux to whom Kitty has eventually become "affianced." Will this one be next?

When the doorbell rings, the drinks are already flowing and we have gotten to know a bit about the Hartleys: they are worldly, they entertain regularly, and they are atheists. Enter Kitty (Lydia Barnett-Mulligan) a TV producer on the way up, and boyfriend Paul (Lewis D. Wheeler) whom they discover is a born-again, Evangelical Christian educator. The Huntley Hartleys nearly choke on the ice they're trying to break, and then the real fun begins, as Kate sets about dismantling the relationship.

What ensues is an epic contest of wits and wiles, and Coolidge and Wheeler prove the perfect theatrical match! She is outlandishly subversive, plying him with questions and home made cake as she hilariously insinuates that her daughter is either a slut or a lesbian—whatever will put him off.

He, oh so deftly, keeps his cool and parries her every insane utterance with diplomatic skills worthy of the Iran nuclear negotiations. Father and daughter are virtual bystanders at this battle of biblical proportions which culminates in frisky middle of the night encounters, and Coolidge in a gold lame nightgown and frog slippers.

Ms. Coolidge seems to be making it all up on the spot—and she very well may be. With her whispery "Marilyn" voice, she seems only loosely in possession of what's going to come out of her mouth next—for real—and it absolutely works for this character. By contrast, Wheeler's performance is as smooth as silk, his cautious retorts meticulously calibrated to hold his own while offering her nothing to grab onto. The result is a mounting tension so dangerously funny, I nearly exploded laughing.

The play needs more of an ending—it just sort arrives at a predictable place and stops. And a secondary plot line/complication doesn't amount to much, but I didn't mind. This is a fun night out, where



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we can vacation on another family's upscale problems, on an attractive set, with some terrific actors at work, the action slyly directed by artistic director Lee Mikeska Gardner who keeps it all fresh and simmering, never letting it curdle into farce. **DO NOT MISS "SAVING KITTY" with an added performance Saturday 7/25 at 3PM and running through August 2 at Central Square Theater.**

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Nora's 'Saving Kitty:' Stifler would be very proud

July 17, 2015



Alexander Cook and Jennifer Coolidge in the Nora Theatre Company's "Saving Kitty." Photo: A.R. Sinclair Photography

CAMBRIDGE — There was a buzz in the air at the Central Square Theatre on the night of a recent performance.

There was great anticipation as Norwell native and Emerson College alumna Jennifer Coolidge made her Boston stage debut in the Nora Theatre Company's production of Marisa Smith's comedy "Saving Kitty."

The audience at a recent performance came prepared to laugh, and they did. Much was expected, and much was delivered.

"Saving Kitty" rolls over much of the same turf as "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" in the story of a New York City husband and wife whose lives are turned upside down when their Dartmouth-educated daughter brings home Paul Cook (Lewis D. Wheeler), a handsome educator who just happens to be an evangelical Christian from Virginia.

Coolidge's Kate Hartley, a former soap opera star, and husband Huntley (Alexander Cook), an

executive at the United Nations, are forced to confront their pre-conceived notions and biases about evangelicals, and what marrying someone like that might mean for their daughter Kitty (Lydia Barnett-Mulligan).

As
Kate's



Lewis D. Wheeler and Jennifer Coolidge in "Saving Kitty." Photo: A.R. Sinclair Photography

inquisition of Paul draws laughs, there were probably some uncomfortable laughs, too. You might wonder how many Cantabridgians — or residents of other liberal-minded communities or yourself, for that matter — would be comfortable if their daughter brought home a fiancée who was an evangelical Christian? Even if he were as handsome and obviously intelligent as Paul Cook?

Coolidge has honed her comedic skills on TV and in films, including playing the ultra-cougar known as Stifler's Mom in the high-grossing — and often just plain gross — "American Pie" film series. You also might know her from "Legally Blonde" and Christopher Guest movies such as "Best in Show," the folk music mockumentary "A Mighty Wind," and "For Your Consideration," as well as TV's "Two Broke Girls."

The tall, voluptuous Coolidge, with the sexy, come hither voice, is a walking, talking double-entendre as worried mom Kate, and it doesn't hurt that her comic timing is impeccable. So is the timing of the rest of the cast, including Wheeler, the son of the late director David Wheeler and an accomplished actor in his own right. He holds his own in an extended pas de deux with Coolidge as she probes him for signs of weakness in her effort to derail the relationship.

Complicating matters is that Paul, it turns out, isn't a caveman. He sports a PhD from UCLA in education, is heading a school in the Bronx, believes in evolution, isn't a fundamentalist, and isn't above taking a drink.

Barnett-Mulligan is perky, enthusiastic, and all over the place as Kitty, a TV producer who is a veteran of serial engagements in the past that have all gone wrong.

Coolidge as Kate isn't a one-trick pony. At the same time she is knee-deep in her daughter's future, she is also a woman on the brink, the victim of her husband growing ever-distant from

her.

Cook's Huntley is an intense, distracted sort, who always appears to have something going on, and in fact he does.

Kate is not above getting down and dirty, such as when she presses an ear to a bedroom door to see if Paul is giving "the car" "a test drive" before he marries Kitty.

Smith also provides Kate a quiver of verbal arrows, and some strong one-liners. At one point, Kate clarifies her political viewpoint. "I'm not a liberal. I'm a New Yorker."

Coolidge as Kate does vulnerability quite well, too, as her husband's infidelity shakes her foundation to the core.

Director Lee Mikeska Gardner — marking the end of her first year as artistic director of the Nora — allows Coolidge her space but has a firm hand on the throttle so things never get out of hand.

"Saving Kitty" is not a perfect piece. It tends to wander around a bit for the last 15-20 minutes, looking for a place to land as the Kitty-Paul relationship ebbs and flows. But it works on many levels, not the least of which is a vehicle for Coolidge to make her welcome Boston stage debut. Stifler would be very, very proud.

The Nora Theatre Company production of Marisa Smith's "Saving Kitty." Directed by Lee Mikeska Gardner. Set, Steven Royal. Lights, John R. Malinowski. Costumes, Barbara Douglass. At Central Square Theater, Cambridge, through Aug. 2. Tickets: \$15-\$74. 866-811-4111, www.centernalsquaretheater.org

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SAVING KITTY AT CENTRAL SQUARE THEATER: Hilarious, must-see play

Arts & Culture 2 August 2015 By Alex Ramirez



It may not be coincidence that the dominant character in Marisa Smith's hilarious *Saving Kitty* is named Kate. *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?*, the 1968 Kate Hepburn movie, is not just an antecedent of *Saving Kitty*, it's even mentioned in act one. The crucial difference here is that it's the current decade, not the '60s, and instead of a liberal couple upset about their daughter's engagement to an African-American, *Saving Kitty* concerns an urbane Manhattan couple, both atheists, whose daughter is engaged to a Evangelical born-again Christian. The other big difference is that, unlike the Hepburn movie, *Saving Kitty* is extraordinarily funny.

Saving Kitty, a Nora Theatre production cleverly directed by Lee Mikeska Gardner, runs through August 2 at the Central Square. It stars Jennifer Coolidge, the notable character-actress from TV and movies (*Legally Blonde* and *American Pie*, the Christopher Guest satires). She often plays an irrepressible, unfiltered ditz, and the juicy part of Kate Hartley is perfect for her: a daffy, strangely insightful blonde.

At first *Saving Kitty* seems like a smart yet programmatic satire. Kate Hartley is married to United Nations bureaucrat Huntley Hartley. He's calm and collected, she's outrageous and outsized; they're both 50ish, and they both appreciate fine wine, though she's apt to parody a connoisseur's lingo ("I detect a hint of pencil lead.")

Though its off-stage, the guest-room is a place of prime importance in the plot of *Saving Kitty*. Early on, Kate complains that Huntley has lately “annexed it” as his own, a barely veiled complaint that the sex has gone out of their marriage. Later, the room is a bone-of-contention when it is revealed that daughter Kitty and her evangelical fiancé, Paul, have never had sex ... due to Paul’s religious zeal.

Ultimately, *Kitty* becomes more than a social commentary: it explores both cross-cultural prejudices and intimate emotional lives. Alexander Cook plays Huntley Hartley with centered aplomb. Lewis D. Wheeler finesses the difficult part of Paul, the smart, often frustrated evangelical. He manages to be likable even as much of the liberal Cambridge audience no-doubt hopes he won’t win Kitty’s hand.

Daughter Kitty is a baffling character, largely because Lydia Barnett-Mulligan is miscast. She doesn’t seem believable, physically or temperamentally, as the daughter of these two formidable people. We know from the script that she’s 27 years old, never married, and on her fourth engagement; yet she doesn’t add up as a woman who would lead such a wacky private life. She also doesn’t seem like a top TV news producer. The actress is a sprightly, graceful presence, and she ably expresses real emotional pain when sexually rejected. Yet as the titular Kitty, she’s too lightweight.

Luckily, the focus is more on Coolidge’s Kate and Wheeler’s Paul, and when they’re one-on-one, you can practically smell the gunpowder coming off Kate’s arsenal of weapons. (At one point she tries to scare Paul off by playfully alluding to her daughter’s high-school lesbian love-affair and her collegiate drunken frat-house antics. This is a mother who is stricken with grief to discover her daughter isn’t having sex and no longer drinks alcohol.)

The one-on-one scenes are better paced than the groups scenes, but as the run goes on, this play, already hilarious, will only get stronger. Give yourself the gift of laughter and go.

BOSTON

Regional Reviews by Nancy Grossman

Saving Kitty

Nora Theatre Company

There are only two things you need to know about *Saving Kitty*, the Nora Theatre Company's perfect-for-summer offering at the Central Square Theater in Cambridge. First, Marisa Smith's play is consistently funny and outrageous, and Jennifer Coolidge gives a knockout performance as the manipulative matriarch of a liberal, atheist Manhattan family coming face-to-face with her worst nightmare and her own foibles. Artistic Director Lee Mikeska Gardner surrounds her star with a constellation of local lights, Alexander Cook, Lewis D. Wheeler and Lydia Barnett-Mulligan, and the quartet works harmoniously to capture the humor in the discord among four conflicting characters.



Alexander Cook and Jennifer Coolidge

Thanks to the work of scenic designer Steven Royal, the tony lifestyle of Huntley (Cook) and Kate Hartley (Coolidge) is mapped out before a word is spoken. He is an administrator of some kind at the United Nations and she plays the diplomat's wife's role with charm and distinction. As they await the arrival of their daughter Kitty (Barnett-Mulligan) and her latest beau Paul Cook (Wheeler) for dinner, it becomes a diversion to try to figure out what the latter will be like. Disappointed that his non-ethnic name doesn't give them much to go on, Kate imagines that he could be African-American, and the couple riffs ridiculously on shades and hues of blackness. You can feel their letdown when the fresh-scrubbed, Caucasian Wheeler enters. However, that blow pales in comparison to their reaction when they learn the horrifying truth that Paul is (gasp!) an evangelical Christian.

What's a mother to do when her brilliant daughter is willing to derail her own budding broadcasting career to hitch her wagon to the dreams of a charismatic young man intent upon starting a bible school in the Bronx? The gloves come off immediately and Kate girds her loins (lions?) to battle with the Christian for Kitty's heart, soul and salvation. Paul turns out to be a more worthy opponent than she expects, but Kate keeps the wheels turning in her head to find his weaknesses and attack them. Huntley and Kitty are more or less relegated to the cheering sections as things play out, allowing for many delicious scenes between Coolidge and Wheeler. Cook masterfully portrays Hunt's combined exasperation and distance, while Barnett-Mulligan is at her best when Kitty's immaturity and indecision are on display.

Wheeler does a fine job of peeling back the layers of his character to expose his hidden imperfections and he seems to relish the mind games with Kate. As much as he is in competition

with her, Paul's real battle is with his own demons and frailties, a battle that Wheeler conveys wordlessly and convincingly. Coolidge is undoubtedly the North Star of *Saving Kitty*, shining with a brilliance that reflects on everyone around her. The most amazing thing about her performance is how she elevates Kate by underplaying her outrageousness, making her unfiltered, politically incorrect remarks sound almost normal and acceptable. A little bit of air leaks out whenever she leaves the stage (which doesn't last too long), but her exits and entrances always provide a treat.

Gardner shows a keen sense of comedic timing in her pacing of the play, and, lest we get restless during scene changes, the young man (uncredited) who clears and rearranges props is dressed as a waiter and mugs for the audience, sneaking the remains of a glass of wine or miming a tennis serve, while sound designer Jennifer Timms has some good traveling music playing in the background. Lighting designer John R. Malinowski cues a rainy evening, middle of the night and morning with appropriate shading, and costume designer Barbara Douglass provides Coolidge with an array of fashionable outfits that accent Kate's quirky persona.

Coolidge, who grew up in Norwell and graduated from Emerson College, is making her local debut in a rare, for her, leading role. She is more than up to the challenge and, on a sad note, the challenging circumstances she faced on opening night. Over the weekend, she lost her 94-year old father after a lengthy illness, yet was determined to be at the theater for the press opening. Surrounded by her acting family and an appreciative audience, Coolidge showed what she is made of and honored us all.

Saving Kitty, performances through August 2, 2015, at The Nora Theatre Company, Central Square Theater, 450 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA; Box Office 866-811-4111 or www.CentralSquareTheater.org.

Written by Marisa Smith, Directed by Lee Mikeska Gardner; Scenic Design, Steven Royal; Costume Design, Barbara Douglass; Lighting Design, John R. Malinowski; Sound Design, Jennifer Timms; Properties Master, Joe Stallone; Dramaturg, Alyssa Schmidt; Associate Dramaturg, Angelica Gonzalez; Stage Manager, Dominique D. Burford; Assistant Stage Manager, Renato Luna Dezone

Cast (in order of appearance): Jennifer Coolidge, Alexander Cook, Lydia Barnett-Mulligan, Lewis D. Wheeler

Photo: A.R. Sinclair Photography

- Nancy Grossman

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The New England Theatre Geek

Dances with Agnostics: SAVING KITTY

Posted on **July 15, 2015** by [Kitty Drexel](#)



— Alexander Cook and Jennifer Coolidge; photo credit: A.R. Sinclair Photography.

Presented by [The Nora Theatre Company](#)

Written by Marisa Smith

Directed by Lee Mikeska

July 9 – August 2, 2015

[Central Square Theater](#)

Cambridge, MA

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Review by Kitty Drexel (who could use some saving of her own)

(**Cambridge, MA**) Marisa Smith has written a *very good* script. *Saving Kitty* is so good that, if logistically possible, She should get a second production on its feet ASAP. This is because the Nora Theatre Company's current production stars Jennifer Coolidge. Coolidge's well-deserved star power overwhelms Smith's writing (and the stage). It is inappropriately likely that patrons will remember Ms. Coolidge did a show in Boston that one time. They are less likely to remember whose show it was, what it was about, or who the supporting actors were. That's a damn shame.

To be clear: Coolidge is hilarious as Kate Hartley, an intellectual housewife hellbent on preventing her daughter's marriage to a fundamentalist christian. She manipulated the part with the kind of panache attributed to Norma Jeane Mortenson's portrayal of Marilyn Monroe. Coolidge the actress is fascinating to watch. She disarmed and conquered as the audience hung on her every word. Her one-liners were like silver bullets. No, the issue at hand is Boston's en masse inability to look past fame to see the performance Coolidge delivered. She was great but she wasn't the only great element of the production.

Saving Kitty is *God of War* meets *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. It sets righteously agnostic, liberal Manhattanites against conservative, good christian folk. Kitty (Lydia Barnett-Mulligan) is in television production and she's in love with Paul (Lewis D. Wheeler), an educator that skews Evangelical. Huntley (Alexander Cook) keeps checking his phone as his wife Kate (Coolidge) attempts to hurriedly dismantle that travesty that is Kitty's latest engagement. This is a conversation play. There isn't much action on stage aside from what happens as the characters talk at each other.


The supporting cast of Barnett-Mulligan, Wheeler and Cook are a sturdy foundation that hold up the production as Coolidge fires her one-liners, execution style. They are the metaphorical adults to her mumbling, sexy toddler soaking up all the energy in the room. It's good that they're so capable because trying to keep pace with Coolidge would be exhausting.

The pink and white set by Steven Royal is effortlessly glamorous. It is posh while being livable. It is a space that breathes.

Boston doesn't see too many Famous celebrities on its stages. Instead, we tend to incubate local talent until it's ready for more marketable capitalist ventures. This talent goes on to be famous after Boston. Sometimes they come back. It's understandable that we go a bit bonkers when we have the opportunity to brush shoulders with Celebrity. That doesn't make it OK.

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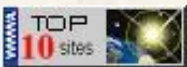
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"What Happened in Boston, Willie"

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"Saving Kitty"

Reviewed by Sheila Barth

When Marisa Smith wrote two-act comedy, "Saving Kitty," she must have designed the main role of loquacious, speak-before-you-think, politically-socially incorrect Kate Hartley for star Jennifer Coolidge. The popular, comic movie and TV sitcom star, (think "American Pie," "Best in Show," and "2 Broke Girls") is a whirlwind of hilarious no-nos. Her outstanding co-stars are her satellites.

As Coolidge makes her entrance on the small stage at Central Square Theater, she is enthusiastically applauded then, and after several outlandish scenes, as she huffs and puffs around, talking incessantly, within reach of theatergoers. In fact, she and co-stars Alexander Cook, portraying her husband, Huntley Hartley, Lydia Barnett-Mulligan as her daughter, Kitty, and Lewis D. Wheeler portraying Kitty's newest fiance, Paul Cook, received a prolonged standing ovation and two curtain calls the day I attended. And I was among them.

We all know or are related to a Kate Hartley, who thinks before she speaks, doesn't listen, is opinionated, and blusters about. At times, we shrug off her antics, laugh them off, while other times, we try to escape - like Huntley, who gets "urgent" calls from work, requiring his immediate attention. You know what I mean.

But does Kate?

The couple's 27-year-old news producer, daughter, Kitty, is coming home, to their handsome Manhattan apartment (kudos, designer Steven Royal), bringing in tow her latest fiance, Paul Cook, for dinner. Kate mutters, sputters, and speculates about what Paul may be. Is he black? After all, Kitty brought home three other fiances, then dropped them later.

In Kate's eyes, Paul's much worse. He looks good. He sounds good. He's polite. Doesn't drink, especially. But to Kate, he's much worse - he's a "born-again," evangelical Christian educator, who's in New York City to start a new K-12 school. And Kate just knows what THAT type is like! And isn't it true, she asks Paul, that religious people crave more sex? It's in the Bible, you know, she adds.

Coolidge is deliciously offensive, calculatingly clever, while daughter Kitty and Huntley are tolerant of her, almost laugh her off, until they no longer can, shouting her down.

And what about Paul? Wheeler is an exercise in politeness, restraint, who's determined to not have sex with Kitty until their wedding night - if there's a wedding, after Kate's continuous onslaught and crusade, day and night, to get rid of him.

The only drawback to this play is we need get to know Paul more, what his hang-ups are, and Kate's hang-up on religion, especially after she reveals to Paul she was a former Sunday School teacher, evoking theatergoers' collective gasp.

Is Kate right about her sunshiny, happy daughter, who falls in love too fast. brings home "inappropriate" fiances too fast, and willingly tosses her fabulous career to the wind, for love, or so she says. No matter.

Smith's lines are sharp, clever, and this cast's spot-on, tightly knit performance, aptly guided by The Nora Theater's versatile director-artistic director, Lee Mikeska Gardner, is a tribute to Smith,

Need a day off from today's turmoil? How about a damn good, devil-may-care belly laugh? Do yourself a favor. See "Saving Kitty". Hurry to get tickets, though. The show, ends Aug.2, and word-of-mouth and critics' review have been so glowing, tickets are going fast. Trust me - you don't want to miss this one!

BOXINFO: The Nora Theatre Company presents Marisa Smith's two-act, two-hour play, "Saving Kitty," starring film-TV star, Jennifer Coolidge, ("American Pie," "Best in Show," and TV's "2 Broke Girls"), through Aug. 2, at Central Square Theater, 450 Mass. Ave., Cambridge. Performances: Wednesday, Thursday, at 7:30 p.m.; Friday, 8 p.m.; Saturday, 3,8 p.m.; Sunday, 2 p.m. Tickets start at \$20. Visit Central SquareTheater.org or call the Box Office at 617-576-9278.

"Saving Kitty" (till 2 August)

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Coolidge Slays “Kitty”

Hunter Reis
VERGE CAMPUS

Saving Kitty is a light-hearted comedy that focuses on the heaviest of topics – politics, sex, and religion. Presented by The Nora Theatre Company at Central Square Theater in Cambridge, Saving Kitty offers the audience two full hours of laughs.

The show opens with Kate and Huntley Hartley, an aging couple awaiting the arrival of their only daughter Kitty and her latest prospective husband. Kate is in a frenzy trying to guess who the mysterious ‘Paul Cook’ will be. Will he be older? Will he be black? Will he be a vegan (whatever that is)? It is clear that Kitty has had a slew of characters for boyfriends, and her worrying parents are no strangers to surprise from their daughter.

As Kate rattles on about suspicions and guesses, her husband puts in his headphones and pretends to listen to his wife, precariously answering his iPhone text messages with discretion. From this point on in the play, the relationship between the Hartley’s becomes more transparent and obviously full of holes. Temporarily distracted by the ominous doorbell chime, the Hartley’s straighten up, take a deep breath, and answer the door.

The entrance of Kitty and Paul changes everything about the previous environment. Kate shifts her attention to analyzing Paul, and forgets about Hartley’s habitual cell phone disappearances. Paul is tall, handsome and gentlemanly in Kate’s eyes, until the bomb drops. Paul is in fact an evangelical Christian pastor, which does not sit well for the self-described agnostic Hartley’s. Kate immediately

sees the situation as a trap for her daughter, and assumes the mother lioness role of separating them at any cost.

‘Saving Kitty’ is full of changing relationship dynamics and is thoroughly entertaining. Jennifer Coolidge shines as Kate Hartley. Armed with quick wit and one-liners, she tests her daughter’s love interest, ever pushing him towards a breaking point. Coolidge steals the show, supported by her co-stars in a way that highlights her hilarious quirks. The levelheaded Huntley, played by Alexander Cook, is the voice of reason behind his wife’s ramblings. The vigorous Lydia Barnett-Mulligan plays their daughter Kitty, who is discovering that she is not as different from her parents as she would like to believe. The wealthy family, Kate in particular, has a tendency for bouts of apparent alcohol dependence, sexual innuendo, and bribery via baked goods. Coolidge does a phenomenal job enticing both her co-stars and the audience with her charm.

This charm extends to the set as well, the put-together Manhattan home of Kate and Huntley. Various paintings adorn the walls and at up stage left, close enough for audiences to grab, is a liquor cabinet big enough to impress Stifler’s mom herself. The plush couch in the middle of the stage is where most of the action takes place.

Director Lee Mikeska Gardner took this action in a slightly different direction from the original story by Marisa Smith. The alterations make for a personal feel that seems right at home in Central Square. Saving Kitty runs until August 2.



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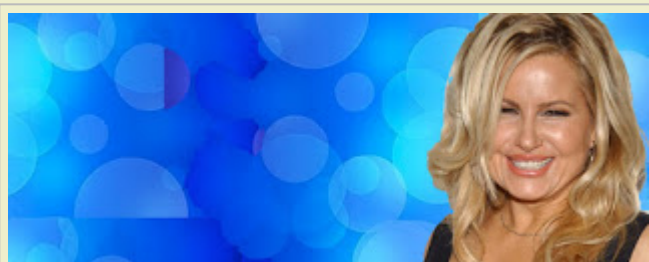
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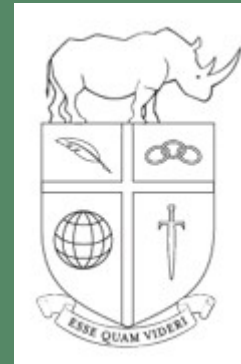
➔ Nora Theatre Company Presents "Saving Kitty" by Marisa Smith - Jennifer Coolidge Makes Her Boston Stage Debut



Jennifer Coolidge
"Saving Kitty"
by Marisa Smith
Nora Theatre Company
Central Square Theater
Through August 2

Think of "Saving Kitty" as a comedy version of "Guess Who's Coming To Dinner" - except in this case the boyfriend is not of a different race, but is a dreaded Evangelical Christian! Playwright **Marisa Smith** has crafted a clever and well-researched comedy that examines several layers of questions. Among those questions are: "How do our religious and political views cause us to view others as fundamentalists? What happens within a family when people refuse to listen to one another? Why do we fear those who are different than we are?"

Film and TV star **Jennifer Coolidge** leads an excellent quartet of actors who bring to life Kitty, her Born Again boyfriend, Paul, Kate, the manipulative matriarch, and Huntley, absorbed in his peace-keeping work at the U.N. Kate and Huntley are life-long agnostics or atheists, depending on your theological semantic preferences. Knowing that their daughter, TV news producer, Kitty, will be bringing home her most recent beau, they speculate on what kind of background someone with the name Paul Cook might have. They decide it would be just fine if he were Black. They are not prepared for him to be a Born Again Evangelical Christian who is moving to New York to open a



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private Bible school for underprivileged kids in the Bronx. They could not have been more scandalized had Kitty brought home Jeffrey Dahmer.

Director **Lee Mikeska Gardner** leads the four actors with a sure and steady hand. Ms. Coolidge, whom I first came to appreciate when I roared at her outrageous character in *"Best In Show,"* is simultaneously ditsy and Machiavellian in her attempts to thwart the budding romance between Kitty and Paul. Thus the title of the play takes on a double meaning. Paul is attempting to invite Kitty into his Evangelical world to "save" her from her sins, and Kate is trying desperately to "save" Kitty from Paul's love. Paul is played with subdued humor and grace by **Lewis D. Wheeler**. He plays the role demonstrating the playwright's conviction that Paul is not a one-dimensional fundamentalist, but rather a complex thinking person who happens to have a strong personal faith that is thoroughly tested by his encounters with the members of the Hartley family. In a post-show conversation I had with the playwright, she called Paul the hero of the story. Kitty is portrayed with great energy and skill by **Lydia Barnett-Mulligan**. She is believable as the flighty yet successful woman who has had three engagements prior to meeting Paul. Rounding out the cast is **Alexander Cook** as Huntley, too caught up in his U.N. job and dalliance with a young intern to really engage with his wife or daughter. His character is set in the opening scene as he pretends to listen to Kate as he is working on his computer blocking out the world while cocooned within his headset.

The creative team have done an excellent job of creating an upscale Upper East Side New York world. **Steven Royal's** scenic design is gorgeous and meticulous in detail. Costumes by **Barbara Douglass** include a surprising appearance of a royal blue burqa. Lighting by **John R. Malinowski** and Sound by **Jennifer Timms** are subtle and effective.

The playwright has done an praise worthy job in not demonizing Paul for his faith. She makes it clear that she understands the difference between Fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and Tammy Fay Baker and moderate Evangelicals like Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in Orange County. This attention to nuance and detail make the play's exploration of faith more credible than many others in which Christian fundamentalists and moderate Evangelicals are lumped together as one large anti-intellectual horde. As a counterpoint to the examination of Christian faith, there is a plot thread that looks at riots in Paris inspired by Fundamentalist Muslims and Sharia courts. The message is clear that Fundamentalism of any stripe in any part of the world can be problematic, and we have a hard time knowing how to deal with it.

Despite the serious sub-strata of the subject matter, this is at its heart a hilarious comedy with clever lines and wonderful comedic timing. Ms. Coolidge's Kate has moments of being seductive, cruel, pathetic and menacing, while pretending to be the perfect hostess. The writer's use of well-placed double entendres adds a soupcon of spice to the proceedings. The audience roared its approval throughout the show, and during the curtain calls.

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"Saving Kitty" will run at Central Square Theater through August 2. A limited supply of tickets remain, so act now to "save" your place in the audience for this entertaining play.

[Central Square Theater Website](#)

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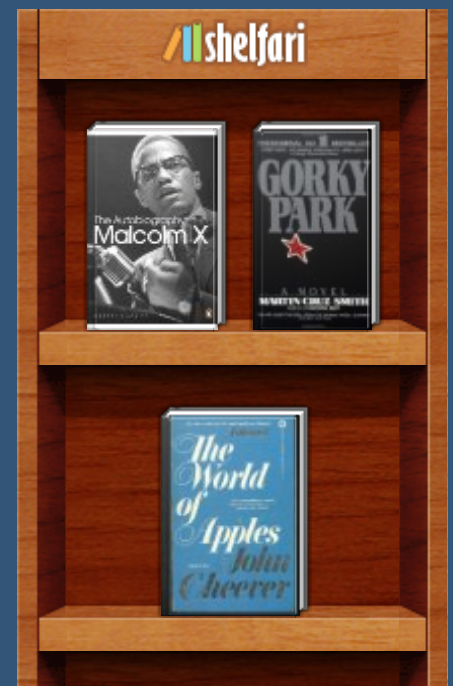
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South Shore Critic

7/14/2015

Nora Theatre's "Saving Kitty": Guess Who's Coming to Sinners



Alexander Cook & Jennifer Coolidge in "Saving Kitty"
(photo: A. R. Sinclair Photography)

A local theater near you has just pulled off quite a coup, with a starring role in its current production played by a star in her own right, local native Jennifer Coolidge. As noted elsewhere on this website, ask someone what their favorite Jennifer Coolidge role is and you're likely to have quite a few answers. While some might opt for the hilarious characters she played in Director Christopher Guest's films "A Mighty Wind" or "Best In Show", others might choose one of her numerous appearances on several television series. This critic would vote for her beautiful creation of the manicurist Paulette (with more than a passing interest in the UPS deliveryman) in the "Legally Blonde" movies. Even with such varied comic roles already on her resumé, it might surprise some fans to hear that she's taken on a part that's a further challenge for this versatile actress, in a live theater production. The play is "Saving Kitty" by Marisa Smith, which Coolidge first did at a staged reading in Williamstown. The play received its world premiere at Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theatre in 2012, and, from WHAT, it's now transitioning, with Coolidge, to none other than the Central Square Theater in Cambridge by the Nora Theatre Company.

One may now add another likely candidate for one's favorite Coolidge role. This play centers on an urbane and wealthy Manhattan matron, Kate Hartley (Coolidge). Living in a swank Fifth Avenue apartment, ostensibly ultra-liberal, she and her husband Huntley Hartley (Alexander Cook), a U.N. official, have become a rather bored couple, purportedly both agnostics. The impending arrival of a singular dinner guest, Paul Cook (Lewis D. Wheeler), the new beau of Kitty (Lydia Barnett-Mulligan), their television-journalist daughter, changes all their lives, especially that of Kate, whose unedited barbs are priceless. The couple speculates about this new boyfriend whom they are about to meet, as they reveal some hitherto unrevealed biases they share toward certain religious evangelicals, confusing them with the subset of fundamentalists and creationists. Certainly they're fair game for satire, and the playwright skillfully skewers them. Underlying the more obvious issue of religious prejudice, though, is the gradual, shrewd and unquestioned expectation that wives, implicitly and explicitly, should make their husbands the center of their universe. This is expressed through the focused Direction by Lee Mikeska Gardner, Artistic Director of the company (whose program notes, however, are disappointingly sexist), predominantly through Kate's frequent witticisms. Coolidge is more than capable of delivering her character's slings and arrows with superb deadpan timing, and Cook's long-suffering husband has a battery of fine facial expressions to counter her relentless forthrightness. The technical effects are all outstanding, from the gorgeous Scenic Design by Steven Royal (with clever subtle accents like the illuminated portrait of Kitty on one wall), to the effective Lighting Design by John R. Malinowski and Sound Design by Jennifer Timms, to the detailed Costume Design (down to a bejeweled hair clamp) by Barbara Douglass.

The production has some pacing issues, which with more performance time and a healthy dose of tightening will no doubt improve, and the ending doesn't sizzle but fizzles. The trip to Central Square

About Me



Jack Craib

Jack has been an avid arts critic and travel writer for over four decades.

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is worthwhile, however, for all the quips that Coolidge lands (including a hilarious take on the "Second Coming" and her dismissal of her Biblical knowledge as her "great mind for trivia"), as well as those of Cook (at one point declaring that "life is a pause between two eternities", and elsewhere that "life is war with intermissions"). There are also several mimed bits with an (uncredited) prop-changing "waiter" that are funny in themselves. Thanks to Smith's writing and Coolidge's acting, "Saving Kitty", in the end, unquestionably redeems itself.

Posted by Jack Craib at 9:40:00 AM

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