Norman conquers the audience in "Table Manners"

**TABLE MANNERS**

With "Living Together" and "Round and Round the Garden" forms the trilogy of plays entitled "The Norman Conquests." Written by Alan Ayckbourn. Directed by Polly Hogan.

Starring Ron Ritchell, Kate Mynihnan, James L. Walker, Renee Miller, Arthur Barfas, and Sheila Ferrini.

At Lyric Stage Theater until June 14.

By JULIAN WEST

I once told my father that I wanted to see a TV program called "The Norman Conquests." Thinking it was a history program, he said "Oh, that sounds very good." The English find the Conquest very grand, though they would be less than thrilled if Britain were overrun by the French again.

"The Norman Conquests" is not about what you, or my father, might conjecture. It is actually about a fellow called Norman and his conquests, detailed in a hilarious trio of plays by the farceur extraordinaire, Alan Ayckbourn.

Norman and five of his relatives find themselves thrown together for a country weekend under unusual circumstances. Norman was intending to take a clandestine holiday in East Grinstead with his wife Ruth, who drives down at Sarah's terminally shy beau, Tom, and Norman's sister, Annie. I have seen East Grinstead, and one can imagine what they would be doing with their evenings.

Another brother, Reg, and his wife Sarah are holed up sitting for Annie. Norman shows up to say goodbye, but Sarah is envious, and the weekend's adventure is off. Reg and Sarah stick around to give Norman a break from housekeeping, and Norman sticks around to get drunk.

The set is rounded out by Annie's terminally shy bass, Tom, and Norman's wife Ruth, who drives down at Sarah's insistence. Five of the six each spend the weekend trying to solve each other's problems and keep both the situation and Norman's temper under control.

Now, to complicate matters for the audience, we have not one play but three, spayed not in time but in place. The first, "Table Manners," takes place entirely in the dining room; the others take place in the living room and the garden.

Each play is self-contained, but dovetails neatly with the other two. Frequently, a character exits from one play to appear at an appropriate point in another. For instance, we are told that Norman is in the garden holding forth about the cat and his pujenias (Norman's, not the cat's), a seemingly innocuous remark which is only explained in another play.

The fact that only one set is required for each play sounds ideal for the intimate little Lyric Stage theater, which is barely large enough to sit in, even a studio space. But there are two disadvantages which have not been entirely overcome.

Firstly, when the plays are running in repertory, the entire set will have to be changed every other night. This has reduced the set to a glorified backdrop, providing the audience in stage right with a splendid view of the audience at stage left. Secondly, the stage has only one natural exit, but characters must be able to cross into either of the two other plays. So the door into the garden has been made from what would ordinarily be an audience entrance.

The director and designer have struggled gamely with these difficulties. Some of the blocking could have been better; one missed one sight gag because Norman walked to the dinner table and sat with his back to us for ten minutes. But eventually they have provided an adequate space for the actors to perform. All six characters are important, and the performances are uniformly strong.

Ron Ritchell's Norman really carried the audience in stage right, his speech - quiet and halting - captivated the character well. Renee Miller (Ruth) completed the cast.

"Living Together" and "Table Manners" are now playing; "Round and Round the Garden" will join the repertory at the end of the month and all three plays will run until June. It is not necessary to see all three to appreciate the "Norman Conquests," but the plays are like salted nuts: once you are one, you will want to see the rest.

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