Gurney’s The Snow Ball glorifies WASP culture

THE SNOW BALL
Written by A. R. Gurney
Directed by Jack O’Brien
Playing through Oct. 20
at the Huntington Theatre.

By MICHELLE P. PERRY

I n his new play, the Snow Ball – A. R. Gurney presents a middle-aged man’s attempts to preserve his own romantic notions about WASP society. The Snow Ball is both humorous and sentimental, a triumph for any play about the blunted segment of modern civilization.

As a young man, Cooper Jones (George Dely) was forced to participate in the cultural ritual of ballroom dancing lessons. The Snow Ball, an annual dance event, was a highlight of the social season. Title passes, and Cooper watches the tradition of ballroom dancing, as well as many other traditions, fade away. His old friend, Lucy Danzer (Deborah May), presents an opportunity to relive a bit of personal history. To celebrate the restoration of the grand ballroom of a local hotel, Lucy wants to hold a Snow Ball. She easily convinces Cooper to support the idea, and the two soon find themselves spending all their free—and not-so-free—time together planning the event.

The Snow Ball continually weaves back and forth between the past and the present. These transitions are impressively smooth, aided by a minimal number of set pieces to move between scenes. What is most fun about these transitions is to see the adult characters suddenly become awkward kids, bowing to the will of their dance masters.

A show about a balloon dance would not be complete without balloon dancing. The couple to watch is Jack and Kitty (Christopher Wells and Susan J. Coon). Kitty is the wealthiest of the wealthy. Jack is a working-class boy who paid his own way into class and respectability. Together, they are the hottest couple of the floor, and they know it. The choreography of their dance numbers is inspiring—don’t be surprised if you want to rush right out and sign up for lessons.

The cast of The Snow Ball is consistent, and really knows how to get the biggest laugh out of a good line. Katherine McGrath, who plays Jack’s wife Kitty, is always amusing. She was PC even back in her dance-school days. The intensity of her commitment to her political ideas is the perfect contrast to the rest of the WASPs, to whom the ultimate expression of democracy is voting for the Snow Queen.

The set is uncomplicated in design, but it is lovely to look at. The focal point is a tall window with a changing view of the city skyline. The set is hung with sheer, opalescent fabric, which allows some beautiful and even ghostly lighting effects.

Writing about WASPs may seem a bit dry—after all, what insights on life can be found in culture equated with white bread? But A. R. Gurney succeeds in showing that, even though they are a dying breed, WASPs are human, too.

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