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THEATER

Review: A Scam Artist's Masterwork in 'Six Degrees of Separation'

Six Degrees of Separation | Broadway, Play, Comedy/Drama | 1 hr. and 30 min. | Closing Date: July 16, 2017 | Ethel Barrymore Theatre, 243 W. 47th St. | 212-239-6200

By **BEN BRANTLEY** APRIL 25, 2017

That dangerous young man who calls himself Paul Poitier has grown up in the 27 years since he first set foot on a New York stage. All right, perhaps not “grown up,” since we’re still talking about a narcissistic con artist of adolescent fecklessness and zero self-knowledge. But there’s no doubt that he has grown in stature and, in a paradoxical way, truthfulness.

This is because Paul Poitier (not his real name) has been embodied with tremulous, searching sensitivity by the screen actor Corey Hawkins in the earthbound revival of John Guare’s marvelous “Six Degrees of Separation,” which opened on Tuesday night at the Ethel Barrymore Theater, with the estimable Allison Janney and John Benjamin Hickey as Paul’s plump society pigeons.

Equal parts radiance and shadow, Mr. Hawkins transforms a fatally mixed-up character into something close to a tragic hero. With this production, directed by Trip Cullman, Paul takes his place more fully as one of the great pretenders, or less-

than-great Gatsbys, who populate Mr. Guare's work — the ravenously aspirational outsiders in a culture that worships wealth and celebrity.

Mind you, one of the points of "Six Degrees" is that everybody feels like an outsider, including those in the V.I.P. rooms. In this uncannily empathetic satire from 1990, a well-heeled couple on the Upper East Side of Manhattan — Flan Kittredge (Mr. Hickey), an art dealer, and his wife, Ouisa (Ms. Janney) — come to realize just how tenuous their foothold on the good life is, when Paul stumbles into their world one night.

It's a strategic stumble. Paul arrives in a *comme il faut* navy blazer and a somewhat less presentable shirt, as it's wet with blood. Paul has been stabbed by a mugger, it appears. But even in distress, he's a charmer. And since he claims to be friends with Flan and Ouisa's children at Harvard — and, oh, by the way, lets it slip that he's the son of one Sidney Poitier — he winds up staying for dinner.

And nobody's life, as the ad copy for best-selling novels likes to say, will ever be the same again.

"Six Degrees" was inspired by a true story, which was making the rounds of dinner parties not long after I arrived in New York. (I first heard it across a crowded table in a Gracie Square penthouse in the early 1980s.) No doubt many people thought then that this sensational anecdote could be a marvelous work of fiction.

But it was Mr. Guare who ran with the idea, and he was singularly well equipped to do so. Many of his early plays — including "Rich and Famous" and the haunting "The House of Blue Leaves" — had depicted eccentric have-nots who dreamed obsessively of hobnobbing with boldfaced names.

As his profile as a writer grew, Mr. Guare himself became a boldfaced entity. "Six Degrees" is shaped by the acute double vision of someone who has seen both sides of the New York social equation and understands that success doesn't stop you from feeling like a fraud.

And who better to reflect that uneasy self-image than a scam artist, especially one who wants to become the very people he's scamming? That's the genius of Mr.

Guare's conception of Paul, whose elusive back story is pursued, detectivelike, by Ouisa and her friends after he's unmasked.

An African-American man whom rich white liberals feel they can embrace as one of their own, he's a flattering mirror to those he preys upon; at the same time, he's a grotesque fun-house distortion of them.

Not for nothing is the play's central image a double-sided painting by Kandinsky. Such a painting is suspended in slow rotation, like a sword of Damocles, over Mark Wendland's blood-red set for this latest revival, in which Ouisa and Flan's living room seems to seep into an endless cityscape beyond.

What's most fascinating about revisiting "Six Degrees," or at least this version, is seeing how its center of gravity has shifted. In Jerry Zaks's 1990 production for Lincoln Center Theater, the show (for me) was all about Ouisa, portrayed by Stockard Channing in a career-high performance.

It's Ouisa, who, well into the play, makes the revelatory "six degrees" speech, about how everyone can be connected to everyone else through six other people (a notion that has since become an omnipresent cultural meme). Ms. Channing's sweet-and-tart air of perplexity, as Ouisa tried to figure out just what made Paul run, paralleled the leap of imagination that we in the audience were trying to make.

Ms. Janney — a first-rate theater veteran ("A View From the Bridge," "9 to 5") as well as an Emmy-winning television star ("The West Wing," "Mom") — is a highly credible Ouisa. Brisk, breezy and enameled in Clint Ramos's expensively tasteful costumes, she is probably closer to Ouisa's real-life counterparts than Ms. Channing was.

But she's also tougher, less of a fantasist and more of a pragmatist. This may be partly to balance Mr. Hickey, whose Flan is more frivolous and featherweight than John Cunningham's was in the original production. While this take lends a not inappropriate whiff of sexual ambiguity to Flan, it also fits into the broader comic dimensions of Mr. Cullman's framework.

The deception of the Kittredges and their society pals always had its farcical elements. But they have been heightened here at the expense of poignancy, especially in the scenes involving the disapproving, college-age children of the play's New York socialites.

It's a tone that screeches as the play becomes darker, especially in the sequences involving Paul's gulling of a naïve aspiring actor. He is affectingly embodied here by Peter Mark Kendall, and his character's wondering post-mortem of his encounter with Paul remains a near-perfect monologue.

The figure in the play who rings truest, though, is its most fully deluded. Or is he? In the 1990 production, Paul was convincingly embodied by James McDaniel, but he registered more as conceptual catalyst than complex character.

Mr. Hawkins, best known for his performance as Dr. Dre in the film "Straight Outta Compton," gives us a Paul who is a truth-teller in spite of himself. Even when he's cribbing someone else's graduation speech from Groton (about "The Catcher in the Rye") to impress his fancy new hosts, he speaks with a penetrating conviction that has you nodding in agreement.

As the play continues, Paul's identity becomes ever more porous. He appears in the Kittredges' dreams and in flashbacks that portray the making of this charlatan (with a smitten M.I.T. student, nicely played by Chris Perfetti, as his Henry Higgins). Yet Mr. Hawkins finds an emotional solidity in the slipperiness, an abiding ache of yearning that translates into continuing, self-doubting and self-asserting self-transformation.

He becomes the yin and yang of imagination incarnate. "I believe that imagination is the passport we create to take us into the real world," he says. And out of it too. Mr. Guare's beautiful play, even in a less than ideal production, makes complete use of this double-edged license to travel.

Six Degrees of Separation

Ethel Barrymore Theatre 243 W. 47th St. Midtown West | 212-239-6200

Category Broadway, Play, Comedy/Drama

Runtime 1 hr. and 30 min.

Credits Written by John Guare; Directed by Trip Cullman

Cast Allison Janney, John Benjamin Hickey and Corey Hawkins

Preview April 5, 2017

Opened April 25, 2017

Closing Date July 16, 2017

Upcoming Shows

Thursday	April 27	7:00 pm
Friday	April 28	8:00 pm
Saturday	April 29	2:00 pm
Saturday	April 29	8:00 pm
Tuesday	May 2	7:00 pm

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