

'Dining Room': Small cast, many parts

By Mark Hughes Cobb
Tusk Editor

Like his better-known "Love Letters," A.R. Gurney wrote the "The Dining Room" as a series of episodes. Unlike "Love Letters," an epistolary tale told by a pair of longtime friends, "The Dining Room" rolls with nearly 60, rather than two, characters.

Part of the complexity is that those different figures, ranging in ages, settings and eras, are played by just six actors.

That challenge intrigued Steve Burch, the associate professor of theater history and playwriting at the University of Alabama, who's directing the production opening in the Allen Bales Theatre on Monday.

"This is an actor's play," said Burch, who is co-artistic director of the Rude Mechanicals, a summer Shakespeare company. He has directed numerous scenes and shows in the area since 2002, though this is his first on the UA Department of Theatre and Dance season. "It's a portrait, a series of studies."

The American playwright Gurney, who often concerns himself with what he sees as the plight of the vanishing WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), is "our late 20th-century Philip Barry (author of plays such as 'Holiday' and 'The Philadelphia Story')," Burch said, though he's not limiting the UA production to New England. The cast of six takes on nine or 10 parts each, through 18 scenes.

"I knew this wasn't going to be a technical nightmare," Burch said, laughing, before realizing that the 18 scenes required 100 props.

Or perhaps 14,000 props, if you ask Andrea J. Love, a UA graduate acting student who is one of the six, and composer of the show's theme.



STAFF PHOTO | ERIN NELSON

Matt Gabbard and Mary Catherine Waltman, cast members of "The Dining Room," run through scenes during a rehearsal at the Allen Bales Theatre in Tuscaloosa. Opening night is Monday.

"It's a simple show, really: It's about the people and their behaviors," she said of embodying characters from ages 6 to 86, in moments of crisis, development and transition. "(Gurney)'s stuff is very actor-friendly."

There's just one set, but it in its time plays many dining rooms. A number of households unfold on stage, with varying families, apparently possessing the same furniture, manufactured in 1898, over the years,

"I think it comes to mean more for the sum of its parts, its attitude," Love said. "After first reading it, I felt that I was nostalgic for ... I didn't know what. The 20th century?"

Gentle mockery mourns the passing of a brief-lived American upper-middle class, noting its foibles, but also longing for its sense of comfort and stability.

"There are gentle jabs ... but in the end, it embraces them all," Burch said.

Burch approached Love, a singer and composer as well as actor, about creating new music. The director originally had in mind a piece by Brian Eno, but couldn't get those rights, so he played the ambient-music pioneer's work for her. She wrote and recorded a spare piano piece, open and cool, evocative of passing, yearning.

A.R. GURNEY'S 'THE DINING ROOM'

■ **What:** Comedy of manners performed by UA's Department of Theatre and Dance

■ **When:** 7:30 p.m. Monday-Oct. 3, 2 p.m. Oct. 4

■ **Where:** Allen Bales Theatre, Rowand-Johnson Hall on the UA campus

■ **Cost:** \$10

■ **More:** www.theatre.ua.edu

"I heard the style, and we talked about what he wanted, the mood," Love said.

"It's very plaintive," Burch said. That piece will open the show, and play again at intermission and close.

In the director's notes for this production, Burch writes that one does not have to be a WASP to "... relate to these characters as they attempt to navigate through the rocky shoals of family, age and the loss of innocence that accompanies marriages as they hit rock bottom, and teenagers trying desperately to fit into 'star groups.'"

He also underlines the debt of "Dining Room," and of most modern drama, to Chekov's observation: "People are sitting at a table having dinner, that's all, but at the same time their happiness is being created, or their lives are being torn apart."

Joining Love in the ensemble are Matt Gabbard, Corey Rives, Mary Catherine Waltman and Love's fellow grad students Michael Witherell and Carrie Poh. ■