

ThirdCoast Digest

The Rep's "Ten Chimneys": A design for living well, despite everything
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Wendy Weber and Grant Goodman as Fontanne and Lunt in "Ten Chimneys." Michael Brosilow photo for the Milwaukee Repertory Theater.

At first, Jeffrey Hatcher's *Ten Chimneys* seems like a pussycats-and-champagne comedy. Thus does Hatcher have his principal characters, stage stars Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, describe the plays written for them by intimate friend Noel Coward.

The play, which opened the Milwaukee Rep's season Friday night, features the sort of sparkling dialogue and rapier wit at which Coward excelled. Hatcher has mastered the style, particularly when Fontanne (Wendi Weber) and her mother-in-law, Hattie (Linda Stephens), cross swords. When Fontanne rushes off collect a parcel: "Look at her run," Hattie remarks. "You'd think someone had sent her a mirror." Now that's rapier wit.

The conceit of the play is that actors Uta Hagen (Leah Karpel) and Sydney Greenstreet (Robert Breuler) have gathered at the Lunt's Genesee Depot (Wis.) summer retreat to ready Chekhov's *The Seagull* for a Broadway run and extended tour. Alfred's mother and his half-brother, Carl Sederholm (Nicholas Harazin), live at Ten Chimneys year-round; half-sister Louise Green (Jenny McKnight) lives nearby but spends her summers as a de facto servant at the actor's compound.

Chekhov's characters are *characters* and so are Hatcher's actors and relatives. Hatcher assembled all the ingredients of farce, and *Ten Chimneys* is a very funny play, especially early. Hatcher twines Chekhov's lines into the larger plot ingeniously and with great subtlety. It was not lost on director Joseph Hanreddy and his alert cast. They played every fine

layer of irony with great nuance and assurance. (Goodman/Lunt: “Does *everything* have to mean the opposite of what we say?” *Beat, beat, wait for it.* Louise/McKnight, deadpan: “No.”)

In *Ten Chimneys*, we watch actors portray other actors and those characters portray other characters. It makes your head spin, in a pleasant and exhilarating way.

About that: I particularly like a bit in which Robert Breuler, as Greenstreet, “directs” Goodman/Lunt/Trigorin and Weber/Fontanne/Irina in an intense scene from *The Seagull*. Irina, an aging diva actress, begs Trigorin, a famous novelist, not to leave her for the young, vivacious Nina. They run the scene five or six times and interpret it in as many different ways. They also fade in and out between the Lunts and the fictional Russians, as the actors kid around or yada-yada through some dialogue irrelevant to the moment. In the process, they reveal the hard, real work of acting. Goodman and Weber showed dazzling virtuoso technique in this scene, which surely reflects canny insight on the part of their real director, Hanreddy.

As the play goes on, it reads less and less like Coward and more and more like Chekhov, and the parallels between Hatcher’s plot and Chekhov’s become more obvious and more touching. Like the Russian characters, the actors and relatives at Ten Chimneys are smart, fun-loving, hard-working, passionate, confused, frustrated human beings. The more we get to know them, the more we understand their private pain. It’s like meeting a charming, witty, attractive couple at a party, and then finding out that their child died two years ago.

We discover that the affairs and flirtations, so charmingly naughty at first glance in Noel Coward mode, have real consequences and inflict real pain. We discover that petty family spats, expressed first in such amusing repartee, run deeper than we thought.

It’s not that the first two scenes in the show are all laughs and the last two all gloom in *Ten Chimneys*. Comic and tragic elements cohabit throughout, but their proportions invert as the show proceeds. We come to see that every punchline lands on someone’s jaw. And we come to see that no lives, even those as gilded with artifice as the lives of the Lunts, escape heartache. The moral of the story: Proceed with grace and laugh even when the joke’s on you.

This production — with subtle lighting by Thomas C. Hase, elegant costumes by Rachel Healy, and a Linda Buchanan set that exactly captures the rustic luxury of Ten Chimneys — runs through Sept. 25 at the Quadracci Powerhouse Theater. Visit [the Rep’s website](#) for tickets the complete schedule