

# We Have a Few Reservations with *The Dinner Party*

By Robrt L. Pela

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Every eight years or so, I give Neil Simon another try. Usually I do this by trying to make it through one of the perfectly terrible film translations of his treacly and annoying stage plays by watching one on TV. (I always fail to get much past the middle of the movie.) This time, I decided to see Simon in the place where he resides most often and where, I believe, he deserves most to be seen: community theater. And so I went to look at *The Dinner Party* at Desert Stages Theater, where I



Simon Says: *The Dinner Party* is full of surprises.

Details:

continues through October 3 at 4720 North Scottsdale Road in Scottsdale. Call 480-483-1664 or visit

[www.desertstages.com](http://www.desertstages.com)

E-mail

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Subject(s):

[The Dinner Party](#), [Neil Simon](#), [Desert Stages](#), [The Dinner Party](#)

Simon's would-be French farce (relocated in this production from Paris to New York, for some reason), and his ad-libbed "gesundheit" (a reference to his earlier dialogue in the play) when another actor sneezed in the middle of Shoffman's monologue provided my favorite moment of the evening. His is a fine performance that made me want to revise every negative review I've previously given him.

And then Miss White arrived onstage, and I forgot all about Shoffman and pretty much everything else that was happening in this tiny black box theater. The helium-voiced caricature she'd created calls to

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*The Dinner Party* is the one about six people — three men and three women, each of whom has recently been married to another of the guests — who've been invited to dinner by their divorce lawyer, who doesn't show. They mouth off to one another about the pain of marriage and the shortcomings of their former spouses, in Simon's wearying rhythm of setups and punch lines.

Young Jimmy Shoffman was able to overcome everything I hate about Simon. I had written off Shoffman as a wanna-be after seeing him in a couple of musicals, but it's clear, watching him play one of Simon's dopey dullards, that this fellow's real talent is for comedy. He is pitch-perfect playing Albert Donay's earnest goofiness, and registers sincere responses to the silly situation he finds himself in without mugging or making faces. Shoffman is never not funny playing straight man to the other clowns in

mind one of Fanny Brice's society dames, but this gal is entirely White's own, and owes little to what's on Simon's page. The comic rise and fall of her reading provided the perfect pitch for the silly goings-on, and I found myself wishing — even after Kandyce Hughs turned up with her own engaging performance — that White could simply sit down and read the entire rest of the play herself. *If one must bother with Neil Simon at all*, I thought while watching White perform, *this is how it should be done*.