

## THE GANG'S ALL HERE

*Artists unite in "February House" and "The Common Pursuit."*

BY JOHN LAHR



No. 7 Middagh Street, in Brooklyn Heights, was a four-story Victorian house on a short, maple-lined row that dead-ended into the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge. The house was condemned in 1945, but it looms large in the mythic landscape of New York City. At the height of its notoriety, between 1940 and 1945, the building—dubbed the February House, by Anais Nin, because a number of its residents had birthdays in that month—was a kind of creative powerhouse, a magnet for modernists in the arts. “All that was new in America in music, painting or choreography emanated from that house, the only center of thought and

art I found in any large city of the country,” Denis de Rougemont, a Swiss writer, noted. Over the years, its louche and lively collection of eccentrics and exiles included W. H. Auden and his poet boyfriend, Chester Kallman, Carson McCullers, Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, Jane and Paul Bowles, Oliver Smith, Marc Blitzstein, Richard Wright, and Gypsy Rose Lee. When Janet Flanner, a Paris correspondent for *The New Yorker*, first heard about this artistic hive from its queen bee, George Davis, the former literary editor of *Harper’s Bazaar*, she thought he’d said “bawdy house,” not boarding house. “It’s just the same, George,” she

said. “It’s all so in character, you know.”

“February House,” an ambitious new chamber musical about the eponymous residence (directed by Davis McCallum, at the Public), serves as a showcase for the welcome talent of the thirty-year-old singer-songwriter Gabriel Kahane, who is responsible for its lyrics, music, and orchestrations. (The book is by Seth Bockley.) The eclectic crew of outspoken residents give Kahane an opportunity to explore a gallimaufry of musical forms: operetta for Britten (Stanley Bahorek) and Pears (Ken Barnett); Southern folk ballads for the Georgia-born McCullers (Kristen Sieh); hymns for Auden (the excellent Erik Lochtefeld) and settings of his own poems; and musical comedy for Gypsy Rose Lee (Kacie Sheik). Kahane also has a dashing word horde. At the prospect of rooming in the house, the deeply closeted Britten blurts, for instance, “They’re obsessed with innuendo/I prefer diminuendo, my dear/Quietly queer.” Britten and Pears, a prissy pair, call out of Kahane some of his most vivacious musical ideas. In “A Certain Itch,” which opens Act II on a high comic note, they stagger downstage in their long johns, scratching and screaming in “recitative, furioso”: “There are bugs/There are bugs in my bed/There are bugs in my bed/Everyone wake up and get dressed.”

For all its freshness and drive, however, “February House” is a compendium of rookie mistakes. To think musically is easy for Kahane; to think theatrically is not. He has a lot of possible events to wrangle: the British expats writing their opera “Paul Bunyan”; McCullers trying to figure out her third novel, “The Member of the Wedding,” and her troubled marriage; the German-born activist Erika Mann (Stephanie Hayes), the daughter of Thomas, starting the magazine *Decision*; and Davis helping Lee write “The G-String Murders,” which became a best-seller. But, instead of taking advantage of the fascinating panoply of incident and behavior that history provides—the house’s inhabitants generated a lot of genuine melodrama—the musical skims over the complexity and nuance of these moments. “February House” seems to forget that theatre is a game of show and tell: too much is cleverly told and not actively staged. To take an obvious example, in “A Little Brain”—for which Kahane steals the idea of Lorenz Hart’s “Zip” and tries to best the master—Gypsy Rose Lee tells us that she

*Sieh, Lochtefeld, Sheik, Fleisher, and Hayes in Gabriel Kahane’s chamber musical.*

prefers brainy men (“You’d like to get me into bed?/Well, I’ve got to know that you have read”); in “Zip,” she strips while thinking out loud. The former is a musical turn; the latter, in which action and expression are at ironic odds, is musical theatre. For the spectators, the fun is in connecting the dots—good dramatists let them find the clues, rather than solve the puzzle for them.

The vexed, impressionistic first act takes a long time just to get the characters onstage. In “A Room Comes Together”—a potentially terrific number, which lifts its dynamic organizing principle, it seems to me, from Stephen Sondheim’s “Putting It Together”—the residents sing about creating a place for themselves, concluding, “When a house comes together/You are not alone/When a house comes together/It’s home.” If the song were doing its theatrical job, the characters and the furnishings would be gathered and introduced in the course of the singing, ready for action at its conclusion. Instead, as in Noah’s Ark, the characters lumber on afterward, mostly two by two, each with his own “issue” and wash of eccentricity. As a result, the show feels winded right off the blocks.

Because the collaborators don’t manage to get the array of artists properly defined and interacting in Act I, the script of “February House” plays at times like SparkNotes. “There’s Carson McCullers, girl wonder, fresh off her first novel. . . . Wystan Hugh Auden, the greatest chain-smoking poet in the English language,” says Davis (Julian Fleisher), who narrates the tale, but whose own cultural pedigree and cachet are never established. (Davis’s charm and humor, which were substantial in real life, are confoundingly absent from Fleisher’s charisma-free performance.) The greatest narrative waste is Gypsy Rose Lee, whose bighearted liveliness was a catalyst for the group, and who gave as good as she got in her teasing friendship with Auden. By cartooning her crudely as a shrill, charmless bimbo with the voice of Kay Starr, the musical really overshoots the runway. Of all the residents, Auden, passionately in love with Kallman (the effective A. J. Shively) and in retreat from the war, has the most compelling dramatic arc. According to Paul Bowles, “Our communal living worked well largely because Auden ran it. He would preface a meal by announcing: ‘We’ve got a roast and two veg, salad and savory, and

there will be no political discussion.’” Auden’s schoolmaster’s command and his apolitical adamancy are part of the fascinating debate about art and politics that gives Act II a dramatic thrust and hints at the promise of the material.

The real star of the show, of course, is the house itself. In Riccardo Hernandez’s minimal set, the place is conjured by the outline of a roof, a parquet floor, and a few well-placed, high-camp antiques. It’s an odd but tidy arrangement. In reality, 7 Middagh was sensationally cluttered, stuffed to overflowing with Americana, which reflected something essential about Davis, who was a collector of all things weird, including people. This idea comes up only notionally, in “A Room Comes Together,” when Davis tells us about his passions for things (“I grow weak over antique teak”) and for people (“A Southern belle who burns so bright/A literary pinup who is quite the sight”), but the song doesn’t bring them to life.

“February House” has enough going for it to warrant a rewrite and another production. I hope it gets one. Kahane has the luck of talent; now he needs the luck of better collaborators. For the moment, what could have been a banquet turns out to be a tray of hors d’oeuvres, a selection of tasty bits and pieces that don’t quite make a meal.

In Simon Gray’s 1984 play “The Common Pursuit” (in revival at the Roundabout’s Laura Pels, under the direction of Moisés Kaufman), another high-flying group of would-be literati convene in the book-lined rooms of Cambridge to found a literary magazine. Gray crisply tracks the lives of the six undergrads up and down (mostly down) the greased pole of literary life. Full of rueful laughter and piquant stoicism, “The Common Pursuit” shows us how the characters are betrayed by time, by one another, and by their own self-destructiveness, from which class and privilege can’t protect them. By bookending his drama with the buoyant scene in which the characters meet up as students to found the magazine, Gray traces the distance from idealism to cynicism, and sends us home with a bellyful of the bitter-sweetness we know is in store. It’s all very British; in our depleted moment, it may even be very American. As Noël Coward famously sang, “With a scowl and a frown, we’ll keep our peckers down.” ♦