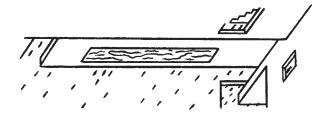
THE CRITICS



THE THEATRE

LOSERS TAKE ALL

Jason Miller and David Lindsay–Abaire on the wheel of misfortune.

BY JOHN LAHR

When a play taps into the public's collective dreaming, problems of structure, excesses of language, and vagaries of casting can be all but obscured by the power of its spell. Jason Miller's "That Championship Season" (revived at the Bernard B. Jacobs, under the crisp direction of Gregory Mosher)—in which the former members of a fabled Pennsylvania high-school basketball team and their coach reunite to relive their days of glory-delved deep into the anxiety of the nation when it premièred, in 1972. That year was a time of both tragic and farcical retreat: it marked the beginning of the end of the Vietnam War, a defeat that cost fifty-eight thousand American lives, and also the beginning of the longrunning Watergate fiasco. America's obsession with victory at all costs was undergoing a subtle revision; the cultural fixation was less on winning than on not losing. Now as then, "That Championship Season" has moments of pure corn, creaky exposition, and stock melodramatic flourishes. Nonetheless, as Miller's hapless former teammates succumb to the fumes of their coach's gospel of success and their alliances disintegrate, you can feel the audience lock into the story. Beneath the constant pep talks about winning is a rueful sense of moral exhaustion, which plays as powerfully today as it did in 1972.

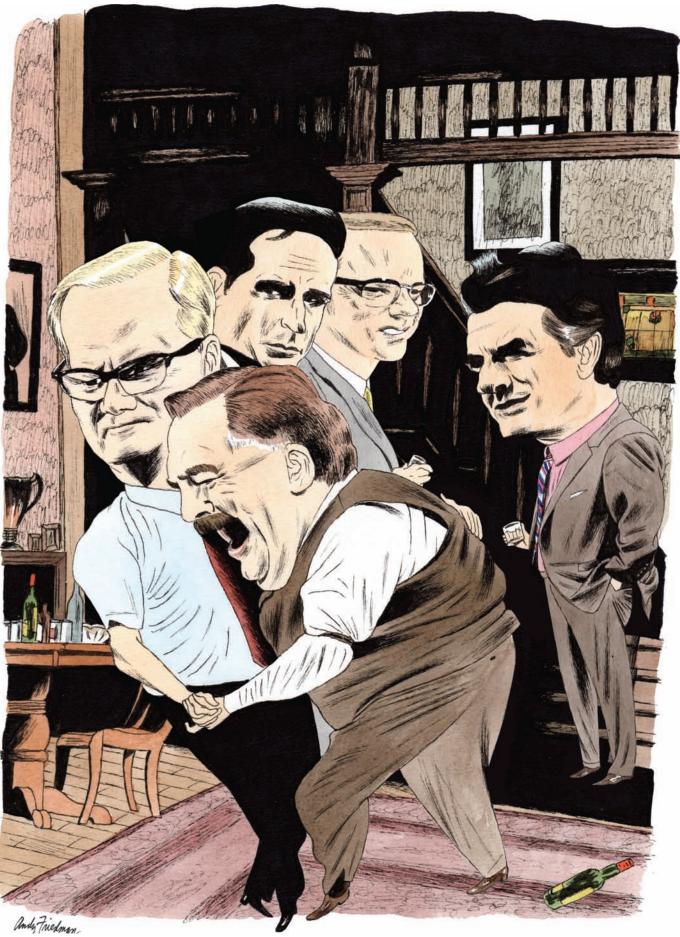
"That Championship Season" is set in a large, musty Victorian house, cluttered with mahogany and memorabilia, but the play, with its freewheeling entrances and exits and its merry-go-round of revelation, belongs, it seems to me, to the genre of barroom dramas, such as William Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life" or Eugene O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh," in which the truth-telling and the bad behavior flow as easily as the booze. The lustre of glory has gone from the middle-aged men who assemble to remember their high times. George (Jim Gaffigan), a smug, self-absorbed mayor, is facing a tough battle for reëlection; Phil (Chris Noth), a sexual and environmental predator, has made a lot of money by strip-mining coal and is backing George's campaign; James (Kiefer Sutherland), a junior-high-school principal, sees himself as "a talented man being swallowed up by anonymity," and has hitched his political ambitions to George's falling star; and Tom (Jason Patric) is the de-rigueur disenchanted drunk, lobbing acid thoughts.

In the midst of this crew of sad sacks is the coach (Brian Cox), who remains the fixed star in their cooling universe. He pumps up his charges with what Brecht called "the black idea of winning." "You have to hate to win," the coach says. The air is full of his competitive gas: "Exploiting a man's weakness is the name of the game"; "You endure pain to win"; "There is no such thing as second place." He's a sort of reactionary Red Auerbach, full of bombast and bigotry: "Communists are at work today. Worse! Students burning down colleges. They're bringing a defeated army home, kill you in the womb today, in the womb." He goes on, "Worse than the thirties. Niggers shooting the police. Government gone bad. And there's no McCarthy to protect us."

Cox, a powerful Scottish actor with a hulking torso, makes his first entrance blowing a whistle-something not indicated in the script—and he ends up giving a strangely shrill performance. He layers the character with a thick impasto of sound and gesture, which skews the play and some of the coach's humor and nuance. Of the group, only the large, lumpish Jim Gaffigan, as George, shows in his flaccid body the sense of defeat that all the characters share. "I lose myself behind all the smiles, handshakes, speeches," he says. "I don't think I'm the man I wanted to be. I seem to myself to be somebody else." Gaffigan's George is never better than in his dithering outrage on learning that Phil, who is thinking of withdrawing support from his campaign, has slept with his wife. Banished to the porch by the coach, George shouts through the window: "Did she tell you you were the best, Phil, huh? Was she good? Tell your friends, you dumb dago!" Of the rest of the cast, Jason Patric seems to have most of the fun. As Tom, the perpetually pie-eyed former point guard, Patric, who is Jason Miller's son, gets to dispense little bombs of bile. When George recounts his decision to put his newborn son, who had Down's syndrome, directly into an institution, because "it casts reflection . . . unfavorable to my image," Tom chimes in, "You lose the mongoloid vote."

At the finale, after many awful betrayals and admissions, the men sing the school song, take photographs for the reunion album, and make peace with one another, if not with themselves. They have long since lost the world that they still fondly think is up for grabs. The coach's words, which sound eerily kike those of some of today's Tea Party pols, hang in the air. "Somebody has to lead the country back again," he says. "The race is to the quickest and this country is fighting for her life, and we are the heart and we play always to win!"

C ome plays are dreamed up, some are whipped up, and some are painted by numbers: you can file David Lindsay-Abaire's "Good People" (directed by Daniel Sullivan, at Man-



Reunion blues (clockwise from the front): Cox, Gaffigan, Patric, Sutherland, and Noth in "That Championship Season."

hattan Theatre Club) under the Jon Gnagy School of Playwriting. Instead of letting his characters find the story, Lindsay-Abaire figures out what he wants to say and imposes on them a situation that will say it. "Good People" has a theme—the illusion of goodness—but no plausible story. There is nothing beneath its showy surface; it is, so to speak, a text with no sub.

Margaret (the edgy, excellent Frances McDormand), a fifty-year-old highschool dropout from South Boston, is fired from her job at a dollar store for chronic lateness. She uses her severely disabled daughter as her excuse. "It was my Joycey again," she says. Margaret is feisty, quick, and reckless. Everything about her, even her refusal to listen to authority—she's a "mouthy from Southie," with a whiff of racism and homophobia in her wisecracks—is plausible; what's implausible is the path that Lindsay-Abaire sets her on.

When one of her friends mentions an old Southie boy who made good, Dr. Mike Dillon (the resourceful Tate Donovan), whom Margaret dated for two months in high school, she decides to go and ask him for a job. To me, this is a stretch of the sociological imagination. A semi-literate woman with no professional skills decides on a whim to ask an accomplished man she hasn't seen in more than thirty years to hire her; the only reason I can see for this behavior, which goes against Margaret's mortified, impoverished nature, is to get her within shouting distance of a class conflict. No sooner is she in Mike's office than her defensive hostility starts to percolate. He uses "five-dollar words"; he attended the University of Pennsylvania ("I didn't go to U-Anywhere"); he lives in fashionable Chestnut Hill ("That's all I ever wanted—a big house somewhere"). Margaret doesn't have a chip on her shoulder; she has a woodpile. "You're like someone on a TV show," she says to Mike; and so he is—this is TV writing. When Margaret overhears that Mike's wife is throwing a party for him, she asks, "Can I come?" and guilts him into extending her an invitation. Finally, after about half an hour, the seeds of a Lindsay-Abaire drama have been planted: a person who would never have put herself in such a situation has been invited to a party by a man who would not in a million years allow such a manipulative, intrusive, delusional, and toxic termagant to attend. But there's more: using his six-year-old daughter's illness as an excuse, the understandably wary doctor cancels the party. Margaret has been told that the party is cancelled; nonetheless, as you do in bad drama, she comes anyway.

At one point, as Mike and his wife, Kate (Renée Elise Goldsberry), talk about their relationship, Kate says, "We're having trouble. . . . Jesus, everyone knows! You spend five minutes with us." But by then we've spent twenty minutes with them without a hint of trouble, except one oblique reference to seeing a counsellor. "Good People" gets interesting only when Margaret arrives at the house, and her annihilating envy plays itself out. "You got lucky," she tells Mike. "One hiccup and it could've been you looking for work instead of me." Margaret is ruthless and unrelenting. We watch, at once infuriated and fascinated, as she works to impose on Mike some of her own humiliation, going so far as to suggest that he is the father of her handicapped daughter. "Don't say you didn't have help getting out of Southie," she says. "You had help. And not just your dad. If I hadn't let you go, you'd still be there right now." Later, she adds, "I didn't want to be the thing that ruined your life. BECAUSE I WAS NICE." After Kate challenges her story, Margaret backpedals and retracts the claim. The scene is scary, well-written stuff, which the actors perform skillfully, but Lindsay-Abaire, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his play "Rabbit Hole" a few years ago, has been spending time in Hollywood, and the industry's habitual glibness infects the ending of the play, which seems to me as fraudulent as it is bewildering. Lindsay-Abaire contrives a windfall of dollars and dignity for Margaret. At the finale, she and her friend Jean (Becky Anne Baker) talk about Mike over a game of bingo:

JEAN: You didn't mention Joyce? MARGARET: No, I did. He didn't believe she was his. (*Pause*) I always thought you didn't know about that.

JEAN (looks at her): Everybody knew.

So he is Joyce's father? No, he isn't. Yes, he really is. Are we on "Candid Camera"? ◆