

Gotta Get a Gimmick:*How the Other Half Loves* is a well-oiled farce.

By Sam Hurwitt

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Alan Ayckbourn's *How the Other Half Loves* was a thoroughly contemporary marital farce when it debuted in London in 1970. Now Michael Butler, the new artistic director of Center REP, has chosen to make it a retro homage to a swinging '60s London that never was (outside of the *Austin Powers* movies anyway), right down to a trio of go-go dancers in matching Mondrian-print minidresses moving the furniture around between scenes.

The period setting is brought to life by Laura Hazlett's marvelously garish costumes and a telling mix of Beatles, Zombies, and Combustible Edison. Most indispensable of all is Eric Sinkkonen's stunning set, a living-room wonderland of '60s kitsch, with lava lamps, beaded curtains, and Op Art on walls that are themselves a patchwork of bright colors. It's actually two apartments superimposed on each other. You practically need a scorecard to keep track of which doors, tables, or couch cushions are in which household.

Although also appropriate to the theme of marital infidelity, this domestic tangle sets the scene for something else as well: Ayckbourn's farce is as gimmicky as it is funny. It's immediately obvious that Fiona Foster is having an affair with her husband's employee Bob Phillips. To cover up where they were last night, they both concoct stories about a suspected affair tearing apart a couple of their vague acquaintance, the Featherstones. Their unsuspecting spouses each invite the Featherstones over for dinner, and then, as they say in sitcom synopses, the fun begins.

In the nerve-racking climax of act one, the two dinner parties on subsequent nights are played out at the same time on overlapping tables, with the poor Featherstones enduring a tedious joke from Frank Foster on one side and a full-out brawl between the Phillipses on the other. Mark Anderson Phillips is hilarious as Frank, a clueless boob always yammering about something inane. Carrie Paff juggles snootiness and sensuality admirably as Fiona, and Sarah Nealis is a pistol as scattered Teresa Phillips, though their reasons for being with Darren Bridgett's unsympathetic, loutish Bob remain puzzling. Jeffrey Draper and Lizzie Calogero are exquisitely uncomfortable as the straitlaced Featherstones. Things tend to be funnier with the Fosters, and the ending is pretty convenient, but overall it's a well-oiled, briskly performed farce, clever in both senses of the word.