



BWW Review: A.D. Players' GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER Is Both Hopeful & Honest

by [Audrey Morabito](#) Feb. 4, 2020



The year is 1967, the place is San Francisco, & the conflict? A young and optimistic mixed-race couple has just announced their upcoming plans of marriage to unsuspecting parents. *[Guess Who's Coming to Dinner](#)* extracts the nuances and subtleties of prejudice and plops them center stage, both literally and figuratively, in the living room of the liberal, upper-class Drayton family.

The wealthy family is surprised by the visit of daughter Joanna ([Haley Hussey](#)), who has made a surprise appearance home from

Hawaii. She has met who she hopes will be her future husband--the immensely successful Dr. [John Prentice](#) (Kedrick Brown), who happens to be black. The second Dr. Prentice walks through the door to meet the parents, the "problem" (as he is lovingly referred to) is made clear. Adding more fuel to the fire, Joanna invites John's equally shocked parents to dinner as well, setting up the perfect opportunity for the families to bond in harmony over a steak dinner and the Tillie's famous blueberry pie. Or, not.

The Oscar-winning film of the same name first premiered in 1967, directed by [Stanley Kramer](#) and starring [Katharine Hepburn](#), [Spencer Tracy](#), and [Sidney Poitier](#). Both the film and the play encourage the age-old reminder that, hey, we're all human in the end, right? The slight downfall to this story is its surface-level predictability for me as an audience member, sometimes down to the line. Every plot point has its place, and for the most part, we know exactly when that is. That aside, it's a nice play with a message that has not yet reached its expiration date. Top that off with a cast made up of both Houston regulars and some new faces for me, and you're in for an entertaining night at the George Theater.

The first impression you receive from this production, and my favorite element, is the drop-dead gorgeous, grandiose set designed by Kirk Domer. Seriously, it's as if a 1960's inspired Pinterest board came to life onstage. I shed a metaphorical tear for the day the set has to be struck at the end of performances, because it was a beauty. Complete with swanky mixed and matched patterns, colorful accents of art hung on the walls, a sleek spiral staircase, and a terrace-I was amazed. And so were the five or so audience members surrounding my seat who individually walked in and each gasped, "Look at that set!"

[Haley Hussey](#) first appeared as Joanna crowned in an eye-catching yellow and hot pink dress and matching jacket (Thank you to Costume Designer [Kristina Miller](#) for that little number). Hussey gave Joanna a bubbly and upbeat exterior, without forgetting to show her thoughtful and grounded interior side. Hopelessly optimistic, she lit up the stage with her bright smile and silly demeanor.

As Joanna's love interest, Kedrick Brown portrayed the stoic and rational Dr. [John Prentice](#) with grace and intention. At times the contrast between his grounded nature and Joanna's hopes-too-high optimism was hard to imagine, but perhaps it's true that opposites attract. Michelle Harrell (Mary Prentice) and [David Rainey](#) ([John Prentice](#) Sr.) enter the story come dinnertime, at the end of what has already been a long, tension-filled day. However, as they have not yet been hit with the news, it's just the beginning for them. Rainey and Brown's confrontation as father and son illustrates the difference not only in the environments they grew up in, but in their own perception of who they are-"You see yourself as a black man, I see myself as a man."

As Christina Drayton and Matt Drayton, [Elizabeth Marshall](#) Black and [John Feltch](#) are as schmoozy and surface-level-lovely as their house suggests they would be. Of course, when confronted with the situation, personal prejudices and parental warnings come bubbling over. I enjoyed watching Black's character throughout the show, as she beautifully performed Christina's change in heart.

Kaci M. Fannin had the audience rolling with her quippy one-liners and sassy remarks as Tillie Banks, giving some comedic relief to the otherwise entirely tense household. [Marion Arthur Kirby](#) serves a similar purpose as Monsignor Ryan, while also spouting a bit of profound clerical wisdom when needed. I also thoroughly enjoyed seeing A.D. Players veteran [Christy Watkins](#) as the well-to-do Hilary St. George, an art gallery employee of Christina's.

Domer's design was not only marvelously classy and just downright pleasing to the eye, but incredibly functional for the play's content. As the plot furthered and more knots were discovered, the immense discomfort of addressing this problem was made glaringly clear. As characters stepped outside for fresh air, disappeared upstairs to freshen up, or poured yet another drink, the idea was really driven home that these individuals were all forced into the same place during an incredibly uncomfortable day. The characters appeared trapped by not only the physical confines of the house, but by the mental limitations of parents who just couldn't seem to see past skin color. It's like when you have family Thanksgiving and political arguments erupt, but you all know you're all stuck there until the last bite of pumpkin pie has been eaten. Except, in this case, daughter Joanna and Dr. Prentice are leaving for Switzerland in the morning and intend to be wed, whether the Drayton's are on board or not.

Overall, [Guess Who's Coming to Dinner](#) is an entertaining world to step into, with a message we all need to be reminded of more often than just from time-to-time. It places the uncomfortable right in front of you for two hours in an entertaining way, and allows you the chance to watch characters grappling with mental patterns we all have encountered as human beings. As the play ends with a predictably hopeful gathering of the families over dinner, I couldn't help but be reminded that this sort of happy ending still doesn't always happen, even almost 50 years later.

[Guess Who's Coming to Dinner](#) is in performances at The George Theater through February 16th. Performances are 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays, and 2:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. For tickets and more information, call 713-526-2721 or visit [adplayers.org](#).

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