

# David Lindsay-Abaire's *Good People*: The American theater rediscovers class

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*Written by David Lindsay-Abaire, directed by Matt Shakman. At the Geffen Playhouse, Westwood, California through May 13.*

David Lindsay-Abaire's *Good People* is a terrific play—funny, moving, insightful and well constructed; played with honesty, flair and deep humanity by a cast of accomplished veterans; lavishly yet appropriately designed (by Craig Siebels); and directed (by Matt Shakman) with a sure hand and sharp eye for emotional and physical detail.

The awards and accolades that have accrued to this play and previous casts since its New York premiere last year (Tony nomination for Best Play, Drama Critics Circle Award) are all well-deserved.

Margie Walsh (Jane Kaczmarek) hails from Southie, that insular enclave of Boston's predominantly working-class Irish-Americans that retains a notoriety for toughness and ethnic pride. For those old enough to remember, South Boston is the neighborhood that violently resisted school busing in the mid-1970s.

Margie's a single working mother with a severely impaired adult daughter living in a cramped flat. In scene one, she's fired (after seven warnings by her 20-something boss) from her \$9.20 an hour cashier's job at a dollar store. The reason: she's late again. Her "excuse": her landlady who babysits her daughter overslept—again—and Margie couldn't leave her child alone.

In scene two, set in Margie's kitchen, in the company of Dottie (Marylouise Burke), her upstairs landlady, and her best friend, Jean (Sara Botsford), Margie's problems are laid out with grim humor: the possibility of finding a job, any job, is remote. A steady refrain of the play is that the only big employer in the area is the Gillette factory—but even a job on the line is unlikely given Margie's age and checkered work history.

In a telling pastiche of networking strategies, Jean insists that Margie look up her high school boyfriend, Mike, whom Margie

hasn't seen or talked to in some 30 years. Mike (Jon Tenney) is now a doctor. Margie shows up at Mike's office to ask for a job. Of course, she's unqualified for anything: her "Southie" demeanor precludes her from reception, her ignorance of electronic billing disqualifies her from administrative staff and housekeeping is handled by a subcontractor.

Margie does, however, shame Mike into asking her to his birthday party at his home in Chestnut Hill, miles and a leafy world away from Southie. He obviously doesn't want her to come; she knows he doesn't, but the possibility that someone at that party might have a job for Margie is enough for her to push him into making the invitation.

When the party's cancelled, Margie is convinced that Mike's lying to her. She shows up anyway. But Mike's kid really is ill and the party has in fact been called off. Kate (Cherise Boothe), Mike's young, African-American wife—a literature professor at Boston University—first mistakes Margie for one of the party-rental crew come to pick up tables and glasses. As soon as Kate realizes her mistake, her social graciousness kicks in. She invites Margie to stay for wine and cheese—much to Mike's dismay—and even eventually offers her a job as their daughter's babysitter, a prospect that her husband rejects out of hand.

In the end, the secrets and lies come out. The play's final twists are surprising and enormously satisfying without abandoning their undercurrent of the crushing burden of folk just trying to get by.

This is a play about social class in America. Class perceptions, stereotyping and divisions permeate every scene and almost every moment. *Good People* is a telling portrait of "miserable" poor white working-class Americans encountering the world of the "comfortable" professional class (words used throughout the play).

*Good People* mines the markers of class difference for laughs and pathos. Without recounting the many crackling moments, the one that stands out most to me is when Kate, the sophisticated, African-American doctor's daughter, apologizes to Margie for only being able to pay \$15 an hour for babysitting, which, for Margie, would mean a doubling of her dollar store starting salary. For all of Kate's supposed empathy for the poor, she simply cannot understand what it means to be hanging on by a thread.

In a recent interview, David Lindsay-Abaire, whose play *Rabbit Hole* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2007, spoke about his reasons for writing *Good People*:

“I kept hearing over and over again about British playwrights writing about class in their country, and people were asking, where are the new American plays about class? And I asked myself, if I were to write a play on the subject, what would that be? I knew I wasn’t interested in writing any didactic, message-laden play, so I put it aside for a while. Then I went back to the idea of Southie and thought, wait a minute, if I write about Southie in any way, class will inevitably bubble up to the surface.”

At its core, this play addresses the issues of class within a familiar, very American moral-theological framework: fate versus free will. There’s a sense that the accidents of birth determine how we’ll live our lives and in what circumstances. Running through this play is the theme of “luck”—underscored by a trio of scenes set in a parish hall bingo, and hammered home by Margie when she challenges Mike to admit that, despite his hard work, he was very lucky. This question is very much on Lindsay-Abaire’s mind:

“I think that one of the things that the play asks is for us to consider the myth that anyone can achieve anything if they just work hard enough. ... All the things that Mike is contending with, I have thought about. I hope that I’m a nicer person than Mike is, but a lot of what he’s dealing with are things I’ve definitely thought about.”

What struck me, after the standing ovation and on the drive home, was that the play’s working class characters, surrounded by all the social ills of poverty, never once ask why the world they live in is the way it is. No one in the play has any perspective on their condition or what keeps them there. In Lindsay-Abaire’s play, the poor have been beaten into submission and the “comfortable” are unwilling to rock the boat for fear of falling back into the icy sea. No one even considers rebellion as an option.

While one of the playwright’s responsibilities is to tell an emotionally truthful story, I find it interesting that the lesson Lindsay-Abaire took from those “British playwrights” wasn’t to add at least a whisper of economic and historical analysis to the mix, but to studiously avoid it for fear of writing a “didactic, message-laden play.”

There is another issue bound up with this.

Margie’s discomfort when confronted with a plate of exotic cheeses and vintage wines in Mike and Kate’s elegant living room highlights the gulf between the worlds of Chestnut Hill and Southie. This long scene, which takes up nearly the entire second act, was greeted with roars of laughter from the mostly well-heeled Geffen Playhouse audience.

This audience had fun with the Southie folk, their twisted logic, insensitive squabbling, their patois and tacky sensibilities, but once Margie’s plunged into “their” world, they simply howled. Perhaps this laughter rose from deeper

reservoirs of their own insecurities about their own sophistication, identifying at some level with Margie’s obvious ignorance of the nuances of taste, but, I sensed a shift in mood in the playhouse, from the genial to the mean. I sensed a “laughing at” rather than a “laughing with.”

I couldn’t shake the notion that one of Margie’s co-workers would have had to put in a nine-hour shift just to walk through the Geffen’s door, and that one drink at the lobby’s bar costs the equivalent of an hour at the cash register.

None of this is the fault of the playwright or director, nor am I accusing them of pandering to a “comfortable” crowd. However, I would love to see this play performed in a theater where the discount tickets run about \$10 and the audience is a mix of regular theatre-goers, first-timers and people who understand an hourly wage as a real-life fact. I wonder how *they* would respond to Margie’s situation—and what *they* would laugh at.

Such an audience, I suspect, would have fully understood Margie’s long speech in which she explains how she ended up in her current straits: because she didn’t have the time or money to get a proper lunch, she snacked on peanut brittle, broke a tooth, which, because she couldn’t afford a dentist, she let fester until it abscessed, then had to choose between car payments and her health; with her car repossessed, getting to work became harder and juggling childcare impossible, all of which directly led to getting fired from one low-end job after another.

It is a tribute to this cast, Ms. Kacsmarek in particular, that in such a large venue (though hardly the size of a Broadway theater) the specificity of their choices and full habitation of these roles gave the production a galvanizing intimacy. Whole sequences were so riveting that they achieved that special state of grace when the playhouse disappears and we are drawn completely into the world of the play. I felt as if I’d visited a world in genuine crisis, and thoroughly enjoyed the comedy of manners, while remaining aware that the overall theater experience, in its own way, also spoke to the social divide dominating American life.



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