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## **Theater review: New Rebeck comedy takes on the 1 percent**

By Jim Lowe

### Staff Writer

Theresa Rebeck's new comedy "The Way of the World," like the William Congreve Reformation comedy it's inspired by, is a scathing satire of today's 1 percent. And Dorset Theatre Festival's slick world premiere production, which opened Friday, proved ridiculously funny — with just a touch of romance.

Congreve's 1700 comedy poked fun at the leisure class's preoccupation with sex, money and social position. Rebeck, a part-time Vermonter and full-time successful playwright (and soon-to-be filmmaker), has appropriately brought her story to today's Hamptons — summer playground of some of today's wealthiest.

Henry is a 20-something serial womanizer, busy even for the Hamptons, but he's poorer than most. He has fallen for Mae, an heiress who wants to give her money away. But, drunkenly he says, Henry slept with Mae's aunt and mother figure Rene. Of course, the lonely Rene, who took the sex for love, is furious with Henry, and won't let him near Mae.

Directed by the playwright, the Dorset production is particularly well cast, fast-paced and ribaldly funny. Josia Bania and Elizabeth Evans are delightfully straight as Mae and Henry, though terribly funny as they never seem to realize the absurdity of what they are saying. In fact, whole play is built upon the cluelessness of these folks.

Kristine Nielsen, a brilliant comedienne, delivered an over-the-top comic performance as Rene, making her a pathetic grand dame. Although a bit jarring among the rest, it did make her the most Congreve-like character, and ridiculously funny.

Their situation is complemented — and complicated — by a parade of delightfully colorful characters. David Turner was oh-so-witty as the oh-so-gay Charles who has a pash for Henry, who he is sure must be secretly gay. Reg is the macho friend, who famously says something to the effect of, "Do? None of us much of anything."

Nilanjana Bose's deliciously hypocritical Katrina is sleeping with Reg, except when she wants to sleep with someone else. Brent Langdon is perfectly enigmatic as Reg's Boston cousin Lyle, who seems to like Rene. Contrasting them all is Katie Paxton's seemingly normal waitress-servant who acts as a Greek chorus — until she too is seduced by the rich and famous.

"The Way of the World" may seem like a silly laugh-a-second comedy making fun of the ridiculously wealthy, and it certainly is that. But, what makes it compelling is that these characters crystallize the doubts and emotions that propel all of us.

Dorset's physical production truly "set the stage." Narelle Sissons' slick bare-bones staging was at once hip and neutral, focusing, with Michel Gianniti's imaginative lighting, on the action. Barbara Bell's apt costumes and M.L. Dagg's sound design rounded out the picture of superficial hip.

Rebeck's "The Way of the World" is a biting and hilarious satire of the super-wealthy — but it's a lot more than that.

### Dorset Theatre Festival

Dorset Theatre Festival presents the world premiere of "The Way of the World," a comedy by Theresa Rebeck, July 28-Aug. 13 at Dorset Playhouse, 104 Cheney Road in Dorset. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, plus 2 p.m. matinees Wednesday, Aug. 3, and Saturday, Aug. 13. Tickets are \$46-\$60, \$18 for students; call 802-867-2223, or go online <http://dorsettheatrefestival.org>.

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