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'The Way of the World': Congreve comes to the Hamptons

By Jim Lowe

Staff Writer

Theresa Rebeck based her new comedy "The Way of the World" on William Congreve's sardonic masterpiece of the same name, which premiered in 1700. But Rebeck set hers in today's hyper-rich Hamptons.

"I enjoy the enormous sense of privilege," Rebeck says. "There's no questioning. I so enjoy my heroine's determination to give that money away, her moral heart with no place to land out there. She's conflicted about the idea of contributing."

"The play did become a receptacle for every lazy, lousy thing that I encountered around issues of social responsibility (there)," Rebeck said with a laugh in a phone interview Monday.

Dorset Theatre Festival will present the world premiere of Rebeck's "The Way of the World" July 28 to Aug. 13 at Dorset Playhouse, the professional company's third main stage production of the 2016 season.

Dina Janis, the company's artistic director, says of Rebeck, who lives part-time in Dorset, "To anyone familiar with Theresa and her work, it came as no surprise when she was named one of the '150 Fearless Women in the World' by Newsweek magazine. She's fiercely talented, and an inspiration. This play is her at her best."

Rebeck has just finished shooting "Trouble," an indie comedy-drama she wrote, directed and co-produced, starring Anjelica Huston. Her recent New York productions include "Seminar," starring the late Alan Rickman; "Dead Accounts," starring Katie Holmes; and the hit NBC-TV series, "Smash." Her most recent novel, "I'm Glad About You," was published by Putnam in February.

"The Way of the World" follows the story of a good-hearted heiress who has become prey to the attentions of a party boy. After his seduction of her aunt, making the older woman a figure of public ridicule, their romance is dead in the water. But his attempts to win back the moneyed heroine fuel the summer's gossip in the land of the 1 percent.

Set in the 21st century, the play faithfully follows Congreve's satirical take on society. While in her play, "Seminar," Rickman suggested Rebeck look to Congreve. And she had seen a particularly good English production of the "The Way of the World," starring Michael Kitchen ("Foyle's War") and Amanda Root.

"I realized it was very contemporary in its scathing attention to the way people behave in communities that have an obsession with sex and money and marriage," Rebeck said. "I thought this was very active around what I see in the pockets of New York where I encounter the 1 percent."

Rebeck began writing the play at her Vermont home four years ago, and found that Janis has relatives in the Hamptons.

"So she was involved, telling me hilarious stories," she said. "Her kids were playing out on the lawn (in the Hamptons) and when they came in they were all green. She panicked because she thought it was something toxic. But they paint the grass.

"That's a moment out of 'Alice in Wonderland'," she said.

Rebeck herself will direct the production. She began directing only a year ago, with Arthur Miller's "All My Sons" at the Alley Theatre in Houston. She has also started directing film, where the writer and director are often the same.

"The director head and the playwright head are actually very different and you have to move yourself back and forth between those realities," Rebeck said. "I feel very ready to do it."

It didn't hurt that Rebeck wrote the play with some of the actors who are in the cast in mind.

"I have the great Kristie Nielsen," she said. "She may be our best stage comedian right now. I've worked with a couple of the actors before, Katie Paxton and Brian Dykstra. They're very, very funny and they know how to do what I do."

"It feels very organic," Rebeck said.

Dorset Theatre Festival

Dorset Theatre Festival presents the world premiere of "The Way of the World," a comedy by Theresa Rebeck, July 28 to 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>.
