

THEATER & MUSIC

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The Wall Street Journal



Cliff Roles

Both Your Houses
Asolo Repertory Theatre, Mertz Theatre,
5555 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, Fla.
(\$22-\$74), 941-351-8000/800-361-8388,
closes April 12

BY TERRY TEACHOUT



Sarasota, Fla.
For much of the 20th century, Maxwell Anderson was as hot as a playwright can be. Between 1923 and 1958, he wrote or collaborated on 29 plays and two musicals that made it to Broadway, a dozen of which were hits. Stage stars like Katharine Cornell, Rex Harrison, Helen Hayes, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne clamored to appear in his verse dramas, whose popular success led to a short-lived revival of the genre. He won a Pulitzer Prize, made the cover of Time and penned the lyrics to Kurt Weill’s “September Song,” which continues to be sung today. But Anderson’s over-earnest poeticizing became démodé long before his death in 1959, and none of his plays has ever been revived on Broadway.

The only one to hold the stage today is the Pulitzer-winning “Both Your Houses,” a 1933

prose drama about corruption in Washington that has received a fair number of regional revivals, most recently by Chicago’s Remy Bumppo Theatre Company, which mounted it last October, and Florida’s Asolo Repertory Theatre, whose production has just opened. Never having seen a Maxwell Anderson play, I feared that this one would prove to be a dusty museum piece. I couldn’t have been further off target: “Both Your Houses” is a take-no-prisoners satire that crackles with fast-talking vitality, and Frank Galati’s slam-bang staging is as good as anything you’re likely to see on Broadway, or anywhere else, this season.

If you’re familiar with Frank Capra’s “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” which came out in 1939, you’ll likely wonder whether Capra and Sidney Buchman, his screenwriter, lifted the idea for that film from “Both Your Houses.” In Anderson’s play, a starry-eyed schoolteacher from Nevada with the too-good-to-be-true name of Alan McClean (Tom Colner) wins a seat in the House, unaware that he was elected with the help of a cabal of unscrupulous contractors who expect him to unwittingly do their bidding by shoehorning a half-billion-dollar dam into the next appropriations bill. At first McClean’s new colleagues find him amusing: “What’s he like?” “Serious. Wears mail-order clothes. Reads Thomas Jefferson.” But they start taking him

seriously once he figures out that they’re a bunch of pork-snuffing crooks who started out honest but gradually succumbed to the go-along-to-get-along Beltway gospel. Appalled by his discovery, the Honorable Mr. McClean sounds the alarm, and the game is afoot.

What makes “Both Your Houses” so fresh, paradoxically enough, is its old-fashioned tone: It plays like a pre-Code Hollywood comedy full of plot twists and snappy comebacks. Most of the latter are delivered by Sol Fitzmaurice (Douglas Jones), a hard-drinking congressman of boundless cynicism (“By God, if there’s anything I hate more than store liquor, it’s an honest politician!”) who endeavors without success to school his fresh-faced friend in the profitable ways of politics. The women in the 16-person cast are just as hard-boiled—you half expect to see them chewing gum. This contrast is what makes McClean’s high-minded last-act curtain speech palatable. He’s the only nice guy in “Both Your Houses,” and the devils, as usual, have all the best lines.

Mr. Galati, who also staged Asolo Rep’s flawless 2011 revival of “Twelve Angry Men,” clearly knows how to crack the whip in big-cast plays. Not only does he keep “Both Your Houses” charging forward, but he’s trimmed Anderson’s wordy script so skillfully that you’d never guess anything was missing. He also has at his disposal

a redoubtable ensemble cast, with Mr. Jones, who stole the show in “Twelve Angry Men,” giving a raspy-voiced performance so deeply etched that you can all but feel his fellow actors rising to the occasion. Russell Metheny’s smoke-filled-conference-room set and Mara Blumenfeld’s sharply cut period costumes are worthy of note as well, but this production is so compelling that it would work just as well on a bare stage.

Now that I’ve seen it, I can’t figure out why “Both Your Houses” has never made it back to Broadway. No doubt the size of the cast was and is an issue. Still, any smart producer who takes a casual look at the script—or, better yet, at Asolo Rep’s production—will see at once that it’s full of parts ideally suited to the talents of moonlighting screen stars whose ticket-selling presence on a marquee can push a large-cast show into the profit zone. That’s what has happened with the James Earl Jones-led revival of “You Can’t Take It With You,” which has an even larger cast (19 actors). Could it be that after a half-century of obscurity, Maxwell Anderson is similarly ripe for the big time?

Mr. Teachout, the Journal’s drama critic, is the author of “Duke: A Life of Duke Ellington,” winner of an ASCAP Foundation Deems Taylor/Virgil Thomson Award. Write to him at teachout@wsj.com.