

Great Barrington Public Theater, Great Barrington, MA

**Survival of the Unfit** by Oren Safdie. Directed by Matthew Penn.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

*“In this moment”*

So. . .what makes good comedy? There’s parody, there’s satire, there’s sitcom, there’s lowbrow, there’s highbrow. Of course, there’s also Great Barrington Public Theatre and Matthew Penn. Their current offering, “Survival of the Unfit” is very good comedy. What’s it about? Troubled youth (well, he’s 39 years old) in the throes of love (or is it anxiety?) with anxious parents (or are they severely disturbed?). This play, making its North American debut, is a very good comedy with just enough drama in it to keep it fascinating from start to finish. It doesn’t hurt that a superb cast is playing the roles either. Each gets his or her laughs and deserves them. GBPT has done a great job assembling this piece of comic dynamite.



Daniel Gerroll. Sarah Keyes; Vincent Randazzo, Carolyn Hennesy;  
Photo: GBPT/Katherine Humes

The setting is usual: a dinner party to meet the “girlfriend.” Juliana von Haubrich’s extensive and realistic set is fabulous. Half the people on this set clearly belong there: Carolyn Hennesy as Shirley and Daniel Gerroll as her husband John. He gets to wear three costumes, each one more wonderful; she gets only one, but Shirley is the chief cook and bottle-washer and doesn’t buy the concept of her son’s great love. Hennesy is terrific with the comedy writing, taking advantage of every moment in the play to exercise cynicism and disbelief. Her rare bits of warmth come close to endearing as truths are revealed. Gerroll has high comic spots from beginning to end, but in his own confessions he reveals the loving, devoted individual that is John. He ends the play with utter reality that is staggering, a proof that love denies the worst of relationship trauma.



Daniel Gerroll, Vincent Randazzo;  
Photo: GBPT/Katherine Humes

Vincent Randazzo plays their son, Samuel, a man crippled by parental love. Unlike either of his parents he is the misfit in the mix who is driven to make hard decisions in spite of himself. A man who is easily manipulated, he takes a stand and holds on for dear life. Randazzo plays all of this comic trauma (read as drama) extremely well.

His girlfriend, Mallory, is a delightful lady of 36, a handbag filled with unusual surprises that get unpacked unceremoniously, much to the delight of John and the horror of Shirley. As her reality is revealed, the tension and

the comedy grows to their extremes. Sarah Keyes is a delightful choice for this role, playing it for all of its realities and never for the potential comic edge. She doesn't need to take it in that direction, of course, because author Oren Safdie had done it for her. Once she is added to the family trio on stage the comedy truly begins. Exploration and some introspection combine to heighten the situation of this comedy. Her chemistry with Hennesy's Shirley is extraordinary. Mallory takes the play into the stratosphere.

Matthew Penn excels with his direction of the play. There are no weak moments, no cute intrusions. He has given his actors, and the play, what is needed. For a perfect comic event, get to see this ideal comedy.



Carolyn Hennesy, Sarah Keyes;  
Photo: GBPT/Katherine Humes

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**Survival of the Unfit** plays at the McConnell Theater at Bard College at Simon's Rock through July 21. For information and tickets go to [GreatBarringtonPublicTheater.org](http://GreatBarringtonPublicTheater.org) or call 413-372-1980.