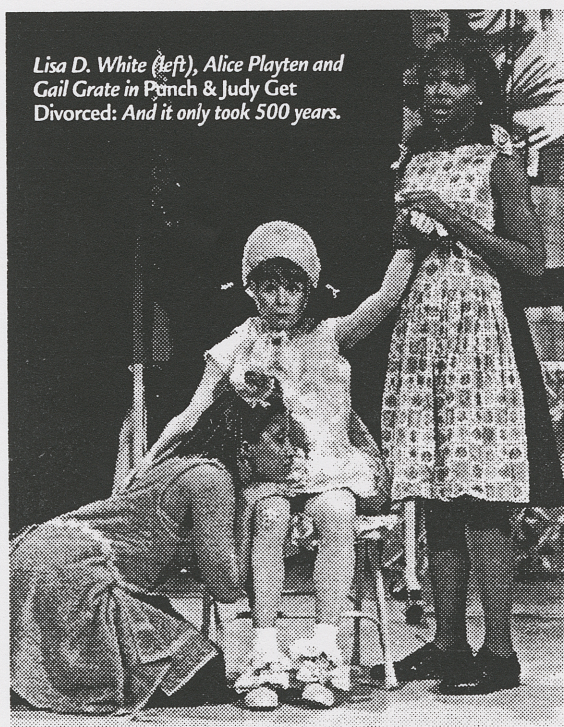


Philadelphia Forum, May 23, 1996

Gerald Weales

Theater

Marriage: Neat, or on the rocks?



Lisa D. White (left), Alice Playten and
Gail Grate in *Punch & Judy Get
Divorced: And it only took 500 years.*

If Nora cannot stay with Torvald, it is hardly surprising that **Punch & Judy Get Divorced**, as the new David Gordon-Ain Gordon-Arnold Weinstein-Edward Barnes American Music Theater Festival production is called. Based distantly on the traditional Punch & Judy show, it softens the violence and viciousness of the puppet original. The new show—in which all men are Punches and all women either Judys (i.e., wives) or Pollys (i.e., vamps)—introduces a contemporary couple to the theatrical pair, still quarreling after centuries, then mixes them all together in a cheerfully sardonic mish-mash involving also the Devil, a couple of dancing dogs and Baby.

David Gordon employs brightly colored ambulatory sets, like those he used in *The Mysteries and What's So Funny?* at the Annenberg a few years ago (although these are his own design, not that of Red Grooms, who did *Mysteries*). The moving flats help keep the first act, entitled "War," going at a frenetic pace, slowing it down only occasionally for effective songs like "Here Comes the Blues," sung by Benjamin Evett as Punch 2, and the delightful "Beauteeful," which Alice Playten sings in a duet with herself as both Judy Baby and Punch Jr.

For me, the show began to unravel in the second act ("Life Without Men"), when several generations of Judys (some of them played by men) share space, and when the explosive push of the first act gives way to deliberate repetitive movement which is held together only by the oddly touching song "I Write Everything Down" (Playten again, this time as Judy Baby at 40). The play ends when a new Judy marries a new Punch—a not so happy ending, underlined by the final song, "Life's a Laugh."