



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for Mud River Stone

Extracted on Apr-17-2024 04:03:42

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Couplings and uncouplings in *Proposals* (clockwise from top left): Dick Latessa attempts to win back ex-wife Kelly Bishop; L. Scott Caldwell with Mel Winkler, the husband who deserted her; love blooms for ditsy Katie Finneran and her new beau, Peter Rini; and Suzanne Cryer breaks off her engagement with Reg Rogers

PHOTOS: CAROL ROSEGG

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Proposals is a romantic comedy-drama, a memory play guided by the late Clemma Diggins (Caldwell), who was the devoted housekeeper for Burt Hines (Latessa) and his daughter Josie (Suzanne Cryer). She is looking back on the events of a summer in the 1950's, when nine people converged on this tranquil country home and not so tranquilly sorted out their tangled lives and loves.

The autumnal quality of the play has struck some critics as Chekhovian, but *Proposals* seems to have more in common with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "I would never say I started out thinking about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," says Simon. "It started with the idea of my first wife, Joan, and the black nanny that she'd had. And as I went step by step, and brought in all these people, it began to take form for me. And I thought, 'What is this like? I've never seen anything like it, except maybe *Midsummer*.' I don't mean it to be a fantasy--it's not that at all. I didn't follow the plan of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, just the essence of it. And there is something unique in terms of my own writing. I'm dealing with all love stories, with a whole spectrum of relationships."

Perhaps the most beautifully realized character is Clemma, a gutsy creation in these politically correct times. "I wouldn't have written for her if I didn't think I could do it," says Simon. "I thought I knew her. And I knew that I would be able to count on the person playing her to straighten me out if something wasn't right. Not that there was much of that. Scottie used to say, 'This woman is no Hattie McDaniell in *Gone with the Wind*.' She's a woman who had a sense of her own freedom. She was very free in the way she talked to that family."

Caldwell, a Tony Award winner for August Wilson's *Joe Turner Come and Gone*, did not even want to read the play

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Undereniably glamorous.

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