

THE COLUMNIST Review | THE TENNESSEAN

Tennessee Rep April 22, 2013 2012 - 2013 Season, The Columnist

Tennessee Rep captures all the complexities of *The Columnist*



Tennessee Rep's Production of *The Columnist* with Jenny Littleton as Susan Mary Alsop and David Alford as Joseph Alsop

Written by Amy Stumpfl for *The Tennessean* - April 21, 2013

As an outspoken syndicated political columnist whose career spanned five decades,

Joseph Alsop was by turns revered and reviled. Capturing such a complex and polarizing figure on stage is enough to challenge even the most gifted playwright. But with his insightful drama *The Columnist*, David Auburn provides a fascinating look at the man behind the powerful Washington persona.

A study in contradiction, Alsop was a closeted homosexual who married a Washington socialite. A New Deal liberal, he was a fiery anti-Communist and yet a vocal critic of McCarthyism. He prided himself on keeping his finger on the pulse of key political and social circles. But as an unyielding supporter of the war in Vietnam, he seemed unable to comprehend the ever-shifting landscape of the tumultuous '60s.

Nashville audiences may recall that Auburn — who won a Tony Award and the Pulitzer Prize for his 2000 play *Proof* — first presented *The Columnist* as part of [Tennessee Rep's Ingram New Works Festival](#) in 2010. The play premiered on Broadway in 2012, starring John Lithgow as Alsop.

This sterling production features former Tennessee Rep Executive Artistic Director and Artist-in-Residence David Alford, in a fearless performance marked by surprising vulnerability. Alford delivers Auburn's crackling dialogue with appropriate arrogance and acidic wit. But it's in the quieter moments that Alford reveals the most about Alsop — his astonishment that a younger man might find him attractive, and his profound sorrow at the loss of JFK.

Jeff Boyet is riveting as the clear-headed Stewart Alsop — the younger brother and fellow journalist with whom Joe shared a column for many years. Beautifully restrained, Boyet needs little dialogue to convey depth of emotion.

Jenny Littleton also is luminous as Susan Mary, the gracious widow who agrees to marry Alsop. The scene in which she confesses her loneliness to her self-absorbed husband is a highlight.

Amanda Card captures the youthful energy and idealism of Susan's daughter Abigail, while Patrick Waller offers an affecting blend of yearning and resignation as the handsome young Russian, Andrei.

And Benjamin Reed makes a fine Tennessee Rep debut as David Halberstam, the rising

New York Times reporter — who went on to win a Pulitzer for his coverage of Vietnam — who calls Alsop “a preening D.C. socialite with a press pass.”

Director René D. Copeland demonstrates a clear vision of Auburn’s largely episodic script, maintaining a crisp pace throughout. And in a play that centers on such a meticulous man, it’s only fitting that the design elements be picture perfect. Gary C. Hoff’s beautifully appointed revolving set balances a neutral palette with delicious attention to detail — right down to the last ashtray and rocks glass. Likewise, Trish Clark’s costumes are sleek and stylish. Phillip Franck’s lighting, along with Paul Carrol Binkley’s sound, are subtle, yet effective.

Anchored by strong performances, *The Columnist* marks a considerable achievement for Tennessee Rep and its New Works Festival.

[Read more of Amy Stumpfl’s article for *The Tennessean* here.](#) Tennessee Rep’s production of *The Columnist* runs from April 20th to May 4th, 2013. [Click here to learn more about the production and for tickets.](#)



Written by **Tennessee Rep**

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