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The Loudest Voice in the Room

At the Yale Repertory Theatre, George and Jeb fight out whose turn it is to be president. Sarah Ruhl's Bush brothers undermine the nobility of national leaders through "contests" to win political positions, as well as their parents' love and attention. George perhaps steals Jeb's presidency, but I wonder why members of this family have some divine right to the presidential throne. If we consider leading a nation as the pinnacle of political aristocracy, we should observe that the position's exclusivity and responsibilities make it accessible only to an esoteric crowd. Why then is every Bush a presidential candidate, just as John and Quincy Adams were presidents, just as the Kennedys were all presidential candidates, just as the Clintons were potentially a presidential couple? In *Scenes from Court Life*, Sarah Ruhl responds to the American presidential dynasties by metaphorically complementing the Bush rivalry with English royalty to demonstrate how nobility and power are a family's game (of tennis).

Similar to Mabou Mines' *DollHouse*, Ruhl bombards her play with a variety of theatric mediums, including dance and opera. The set ties each disparate aesthetic to the next, as it renders a forced association between two scenes due to a shared space. Sometimes this produces a comical effect, such as when the bleeding Catherine of Braganza sits up and immediately transforms into Columba Bush. The tonal shift shocks the crowd and reverberates into laughter, but Ruhl leaves little time to contemplate the metaphorical significance of the moment. Thus, I'm led to care more for the shock value of these moments, while Ruhl sends her brash political messages through operatic numbers. *Scenes from Court Life* explores the theatrical space, but keeps its styles distinct.

Ruhl separates her humor and politics for the sake of accessibility, and I laugh half knowing why. The satirical depictions of politics and aristocracy are entertaining and almost slapstick, but the play's fundamental metaphors, namely tennis and doubled roles, lend themselves to complex themes that we must feel to understand. The relationships between George and Jeb do not translate so obviously to Charles II and Barnaby, the "whipping boy." The Bush brothers play an aggressive game of tennis, while the royal relationship is ironically on more equal terms. And yet, the juxtaposed aristocratic families are ostensibly bound through brilliant diplomatic connections. These ostensible connections are not analyzed but felt and thusly expressed through laughter. Ruhl makes the subject comprehendible to all individuals, including the non-serious and non-scholarly, by conveying meaning through feeling so that we may laugh at and recognize flaws in a political system.

The loudest voice in the room is the one we hear. George is louder than Jeb, Prince Charles is inherently louder than Barnaby, and Ruhl's jokes echo farther than her discrete political examples. The resulting work is hilarious and frustrating, as Ruhl constantly avoids and questions the expected outcome. For instance, George's rampant takeover of Jeb's political campaign is in stark contrast to Jeb's superior political experience. Ruhl makes this especially obvious when she juxtaposes George's innocent portraitures, his post-presidential hobby, against Jeb's incessant political struggles, which take priority over family time. Something is awry, and while we can compare the politics of presidential dynasties and monarchies, they are fundamentally distinct from one another as one is a product of face and the other of blood. Regardless, where there is confusion, there is laughter. Ruhl's *Scenes from Court Life* feels like an exploration of political structures that questions rather than answers. When laughing at the absurdity of each scene, it only seems right to ask, "How can this be real? How does any of this make sense?" Remember this isn't documentary, but a personal perspective on a situation.