

From: Time Out NY

Mr. Pim Passes By

By A.A. Milne, Dir. John Giampetro. With ensemble cast. Common Basis Theater (see Off-Off Broadway)

Someday, in an effort to squeeze a few more pennies out of a successful franchise, some studio exec will greenlight *the Simpsons: Live Action Extravaganza*. Here's a tip for the unlucky casting director on that job: We've found your Mr. Burns. Robert Lehrer's portrayal of the title character in A.A. Milne's 1920 comedy *Mr. Pim Passes By* bears such a striking resemblance to our favorite nuclear-power tyrant—the hunched posture, the gaunt face, the too-short trousers, and even the wispy, blue-blooded voice—one begins to think Lehrer may have actually been Matt Groening's inspiration. The only difference between the two caricatures: Burns is sinister, while Pim is simply careless.

Set in the English countryside, the play opens as Pim drops in on the estate that hot-tempered farmer George (Joseph J. Menino) shares with his wife, Olivia (Annette Previti), and his young niece Dinah (Saluda Camp). In the course of introductions, Pim lets slip that he recently ran into Olivia's first husband—whom everyone thought to be dead. This casual remark turns the family's staid, respectable country life upside down.

The declared mission of the company behind this performance, called Serendipitous Productions, is to “produce unknown plays by well-known authors.” But there's a good reason that Mr. Pim has taken a backseat to Milne's more famous work, such as *Winnie the Pooh*. When it was written, the play's mockery of conservative English country ways was probably edgier and more side-splitting. Whatever satirical punch it might have had, however, has softened with time. (One especially dated gag involves George's disgust with the “newfangled” square clouds featured in modernist painting.) What we are left with is a mild comedy of errors. Luckily, the cast injects enough enthusiasm and whimsy into the material to keep it entertaining.

To the director John Giampetro's credit, the actors ham it up rather than try to add depth to Milne's two-dimensional characters. Only Olivia, who turns the chaos catalyzed by Pim's visit to her own advantage, remains cool. Played with devilish self-confidence by the raven-haired Previti, she also recalls another favorite television character: *Seinfeld's Elaine*. Whatever else this play can tell us about Milne's work, it sure shows this: he could have written one hell of a sitcom. —David Katz.

