

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Young Romance: The Past Is Never Past

By NEIL GENZLINGER

CHACKETTSTOWN CENTENARY COLLEGE here has no archaeology major, but there is a first-rate excavation in progress at the theater on campus, where the Centenary Stage Company is offering "Sight Unseen," Donald Margulies's heady play about digging up and clinging to the past.

The work, seen Off Broadway in 1992 and revived on Broadway last year, is a shining example of the craft of playwriting, and Centenary's cast does it justice, led by Gary Littman and Dina Ann Comolli in the lead roles of Jonathan and Patricia. He is a painter, and back in college she was his model and lover, but we first see them many years later, when he has become the sensation of the art world and she, married to someone else, has settled into an unprepossessing life in the English countryside.

Mr. Margulies rolls out their story in a time-jumping fashion (the last scene in the play is the earliest chronologically) that is difficult to describe but perfectly clear in performance, aided here by Gordon Danielli's versatile set and Will Rothfuss's lighting. Jonathan, who has come to England from the United States for a major retrospective, drops in on Patricia and her husband, Nick (Steven L. Barron), and the metaphors about things kept and things thrown away are thick in the air.

For one thing, Nick is an archaeologist. "I study the past in order to make sense of the present," he says, and of course that is

what both Mr. Margulies and Jonathan are doing. There is, as well, a painting hanging in Patricia and Nick's home — of her, done by Jonathan, one of his earliest works — and Jonathan's excitement about rediscovering it is laden with meaning.

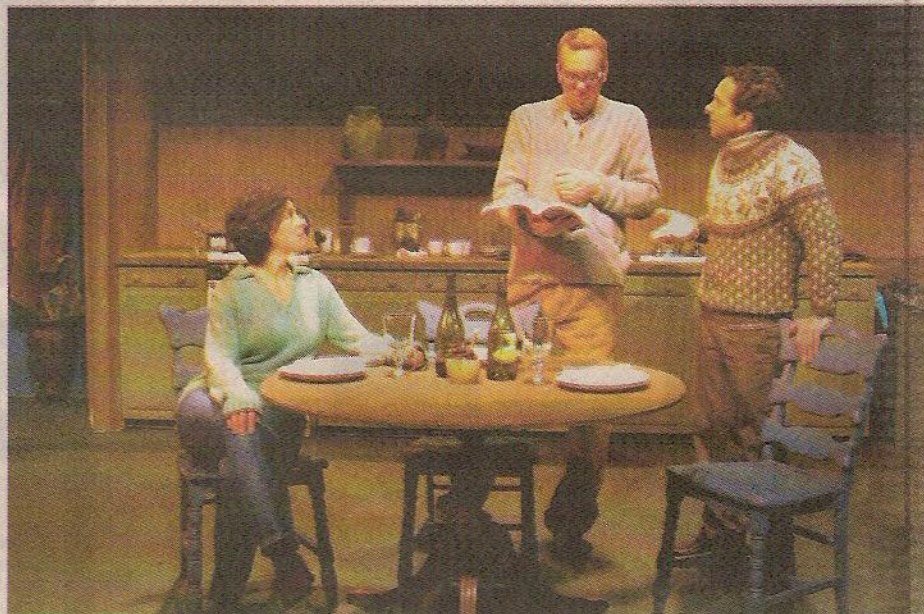
Mr. Margulies, though, doesn't hit you over the head with all this metaphorical baggage, and Steven Dennis, the director here, doesn't either. Instead, he keeps his actors moving at a brisk pace and lets the sparks fly.

Laura Linney was nominated for a Tony Award for her performance last year as Patricia, but Ms. Comolli does not seem remotely intimidated, investing the role with her own brand of wistfulness. Mr. Littman is smooth and convincing as Jonathan, an artist who simultaneously relishes his success and isn't quite comfortable with it.

And Mr. Barron brings fine comic timing to his part; his putdown of the pretensions of Jonathan and the art world in general is priceless. Shannon Noecker rounds out the cast competently as a pushy German interviewer.

If "Sight Unseen" has a flaw, it's that it invests quite a lot in what is, essentially, a relatively brief college romance. Does anyone really brood so about flings that are 15 years in the past? The answer is, yes, middle-age men do, which at heart makes "Sight Unseen" a — yech! — male midlife crisis play. But it's an expertly disguised one.

"Sight Unseen" continues through Nov. 20 at Centenary Stage, 400 Jefferson Street, Hackettstown, (908) 979-0900, www.centenarystageco.org.



Carl Wallmau