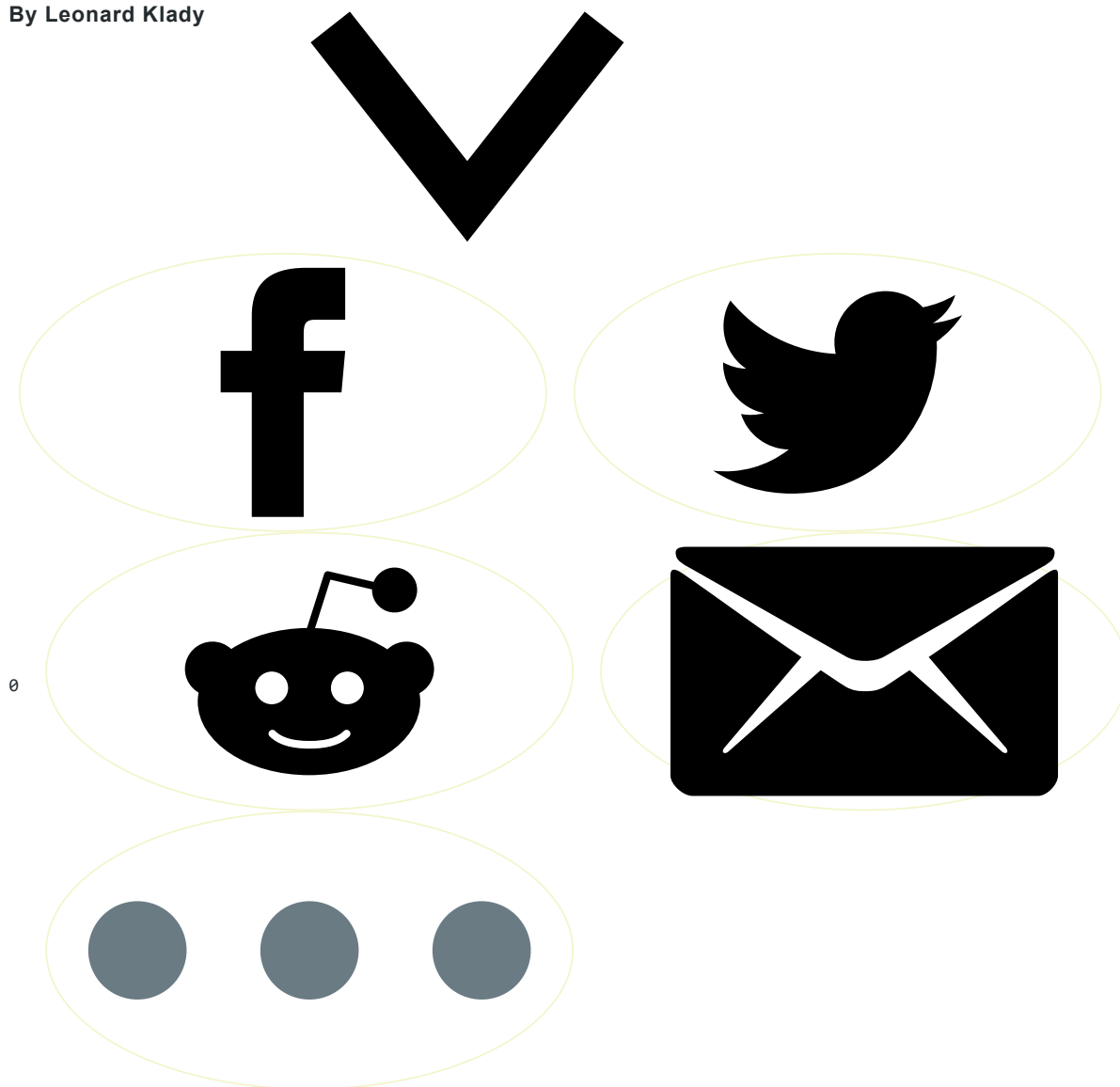


# Six Degrees of Separation

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By Leonard Klady



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Scientific sociology aside, the screen version of John Guare’s award-winning stage hit is an elaborate mousetrap where getting caught can be delightful fun. But the central scam dissipates into self-analysis and moralization. The more serious it becomes, the more of a pedestrian path it takes, and the tug of war between the rational and the absurd draws no victor. That won’t matter to the sophisticated viewer but poses serious commercial limitations for this classy entertainment.

The tale within a tale is related by the Kittredges (Stockard Channing, Donald Sutherland), chic Fifth Avenue folk who deal and speculate in high-society art. They have an incredible story to relate about a young black man who arrived at their doorstep late one evening bleeding from a knife wound and claiming to have been a mugging victim. Identifying himself as Paul (Will Smith), a friend and classmate of their children at Harvard, he enters their life for a moment.

In that brief period, he proves himself immaculately seductive. Posing as the son of Sidney Poitier, he captivates the couple and a visiting friend (Ian McKellen) with his candor, intelligence and passion. He also cooks a spectacular meal and by the end of the evening has established such a warm bond that the Kittredges insist he sleep over.

The bubble promptly bursts when Ouisa Kittredge awakens the next morning and finds their guest cavorting with a male hustler. Paul flees and his hosts begin to hyperventilate. Was something stolen? Worse yet, they might have been murdered.

They sense they were taken advantage of and resent how easily they fell for his patter. It doesn't become any clearer when friends relate a carbon-copy experience. The police are called but make it very clear perpetrating gullibility is not a felony offense.

However, the incident weighs heavily on their minds. They simply must get to the root of why anyone would go to such elaborate lengths to create such an elegant ruse for no tangible profit. Paul's importance diminishes as the Kittredges begin to look in the mirror for the essential answers.

The transition from farce to thriller to moral inspection does not flow organically. Guare and director Fred Schepisi are intent on changing the rules as the story proceeds. While it provides the material with an edge and uncertainty, the wildly black comic elements evaporate as the script attempts to make sense of the human condition. The thrall of an exciting journey is run aground by rather routine, banal explanations.

Smith proves himself an extremely charismatic presence, convincing in his sincerity and cunning in conveying his ability as a human sponge. Channing, who created her role on Broadway, has the less flashy part. Ultimately she must provide the human, realistic perspective. Watching that unfold on her face is a frighteningly withering experience.

Caught between in a tour de force performance is Sutherland as Flan Kittredge. He is the embodiment of the educated, glib and superficial Manhattan social lion that Guare truly loathes.

"Six Degrees" is magical when addressing the preposterous. Like any good storyteller, Paul is deft at knitting eyes with wool. Somehow explaining that gift destroys the illusion in a most unpleasant fashion.