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ENTERTAINMENT

Theater: A Dull *Big Knife*, a Noble *La Ruta* Spotlights Injustice

Posted: 04/19/2013 7:10 pm

THE BIG KNIFE * out of ****

LA RUTA ** 1/2 out of ****

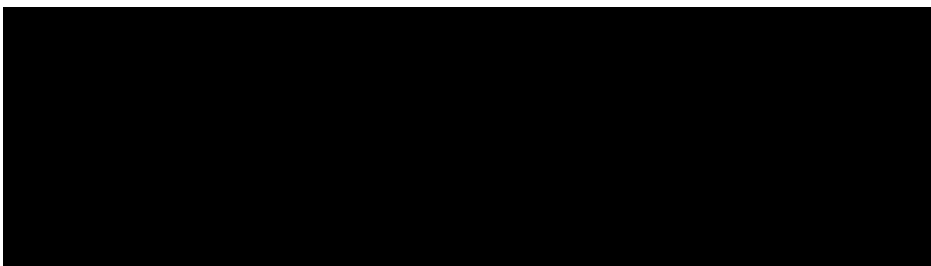
THE BIG KNIFE * out of ****

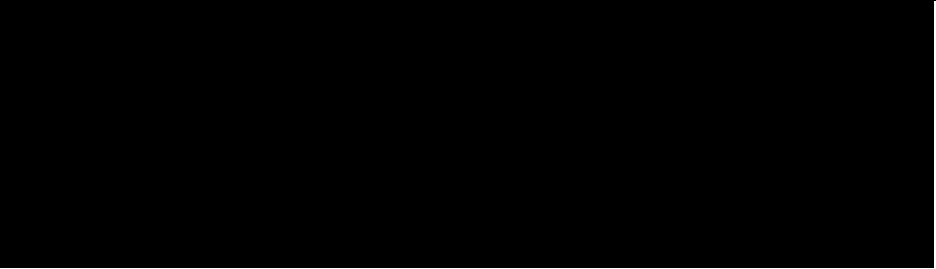
ROUNDAABOUT THEATRE AT AMERICAN AIRLINES

Perhaps the recent fad for writer Clifford Odets will start to fade now. His dusty dinosaur *Awake And Sing!* was magically given a pitch-perfect revival that somehow managed to zero in on the universal in his work. But Odet's image as a Serious Writer whose work became dated and self-important almost as soon as it left his typewriter has proven more durable than that magic act. *Golden Boy* (which others liked more than me) disappeared quickly thanks to an absurd plot (hmm, should our hero be a classical violinist... or a professional boxer?) and stilted dialogue that screams of a juvenile desire to be weighty.

Now comes the stillborn work *The Big Knife*, a would-be acidic take on Hollywood that became a very dated and self-important film starring great actors like Jack Palance and Ida Lupino and Shelley Winters in key roles. Odets covered this territory far more memorably in what will surely rank as his most important work: the screenplay for *Sweet Smell Of Success*, which is set in the NYC of all-powerful gossip columnists but feels of a piece. Of course, in that screenplay Odets was reshaping the work of Ernest Lehman, who wrote the novella it was based on as well as drafts of the script until he became ill and Odets stepped in. He reportedly did a major overhaul but shaping someone else's work is far different from creating your own.

When left to his own devices, we get *The Big Knife*. Movie star Charlie Castle (an at-sea Bobby Cannavale) has everything but happiness in 1948 -- a gorgeous LA home (a solid set by John Lee Beatty), a beautiful wife (Tony nominee Marin Ireland), mistresses and enough power to treat the town's most powerful gossip columnist (Brenda Wehle) almost as an equal. Of course, that's on the surface. His wife has all but left him again, his best friend has offered to marry her, his toadying pal has marriage troubles (including a wife who would rather play house with Castle) and a two-bit actress who knows Charlie's worst secret and keeps hinting about it to one and all whenever she's tozzled. Which is all the time, apparently. Meanwhile the studio chief is pressuring Charlie to sign a new contract committing him to the studio for the next 14 years in return for the princely sum of \$3 million. (Oh how times have changed.)





It's hard to care about Charlie, a jerk who seems to bend to the will of whomever is talking to him at the time. A floozy can get him revved up. His wife can get Charlie to promise he'll tear up that new contract. His studio chief can get Charlie to renege on the wife and sign that very same contract. About the only thing Charlie won't do is be complicit in murder, which is about the only surprise of the evening. Murder? Yes, that two-bit actress knows that Charlie was the drunk driver of a car one night that ended in vehicular homicide; his pal took the rap and went to jail. Movie stars can't go to jail so the gal has to be quieted one way or another. Bad movies aren't rapacious and bad enough on their own; Odets had to throw in murder just to make clear the studios have no soul.

It's all tiresomely obvious and moralizing, with director Doug Hughes unable to bring life to his cast or the play. The costumes by Catherine Zuber don't help. They're generally unflattering, from the bulky jacket of Charlie's book-writing friend who wants to marry his wife to the ludicrous looking wrap his wife walks in on at a key moment. You should be registering her shock over seeing Charlie with another woman; instead you register your shock over a gigantic monstrosity that Joan Crawford would have hesitated sporting even in her heyday. Ireland is beautiful and talented enough to almost pull it off but ultimately the wrap steals the spotlight.

Reg Rogers comes closest to finding some music in the Odets dialogue, but it's a minor victory in a minor play. He plays Smiley Coy, which is a name to rank right down there with Buddy Bliss, Dixie Evans (the actress) and Charlie Castle. The only character not given a last name? The black servant Russell. Apparently Odets' leftist politics still had room to grow.

LA RUTA ** 1/2 out of ****
WORKING THEATER

Some of the most interesting theater I've seen has been site-specific works, ranging from *Macbeth* in a rundown hotel to a taut drama held in two bathrooms near the Bethesda fountain in Central Park. It's not quite a cure-all but it sure comes close.

La Ruta by Ed Cardona Jr. is a well-intentioned tale of undocumented workers (that's "illegal immigrants" to the politically incorrect) making the dangerous, life-threatening journey to the North, aka the United States. The set-up is familiar, the dialogue rudimentary and in a show of this sort, you're not wondering if the trip will turn out all right; you're wondering exactly how wrong it will go. (The answer? Pretty wrong.)

Playing types, the cast ranges from so-so to pretty good. They include the money-hungry woman leading the trip, an indifferent truck driver, a drug mule, a former gang member, a young woman without any family and so on. I wouldn't judge any of the actors on their work here though Gerardo Rodriguez and Bobby Plasencia left the most favorable impression.

Seen on stage in a regular theater, this would have been very poor theater. But the audience at my show was herded into a tent outside of St. John The Divine's in Harlem. (The staging of the play takes part throughout the city.) Cast-members (the ones smart enough to bring bottled water) mixed in with the audience. Soon the cruel ringleader Raula (a notably weak Sheila Tapia) starts herding everyone into the back of an 18 wheeler. The audience is perched uncomfortably on cardboard boxes of various sizes and the real story unfolds. A cardboard wall disappears and we are looking into a second compartment where four people are crammed in with some drugs while the audience

represents the other passengers left in the main section.

The action jumps back and forth, from watching the four people warily get to know each other in the back to peeking into the cab up front where Raula and the driver Albert joke back and forth while making unscheduled stops to pick up drugs here, sell off drugs there and try to enter the "big time." Additional scenes are staged outside the semi-trailer, with sounds of Raula interacting with various nefarious types. A nice touch is that we realize the dialogue in English is incomprehensible to most of the people hiding in the truck.

So a well-intentioned piece of didactic theater is greatly enlivened by being staged inside an actual semi-trailer. After the journey ends, the audience is brought out into the light and encouraged to walk through an exhibit curated by **Magnum Foundation** about the human toll of human trafficking and the desperate need for an overhaul in US immigration policy.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) ****

Chimichangas And Zoloff *

Closer Than Ever ***

Cock ** 1/2

Harvey with Jim Parsons *

My Children! My Africa! ****

Once On This Island ***

Potted Potter *

Storefront Church ** 1/2

Title And Deed ***

Picture Incomplete (NYMF) **

Flambe Dreams (NYMF) **

Rio (NYMF) **

The Two Month Rule (NYMF) *

Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2

Stealing Time (NYMF) **

Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2

Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ***

Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2

How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2

Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***

Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2

Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2

Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2

Living With Henry (NYMF) *

A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2

The Last Smoker In America **

Gore Vidal's The Best Man (w new cast) ***

Into The Woods at Delacorte ** 1/2

Bring It On: The Musical **

Bullet For Adolf *

Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc. **

Harrison, TX ***

Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck" (FringeNYC) * 1/2

Pink Milk (FringeNYC) * 1/2

Who Murdered Love (FringeNYC) no stars

Storytime With Mr. Buttermen (FringeNYC) **

#MormonInChief (FringeNYC) **

An Interrogation Primer (FringeNYC) ***

An Evening With Kirk Douglas (FringeNYC) *

Sheherizade (FringeNYC) **

The Great Pie Robbery (FringeNYC) ** 1/2

Independents (FringeNYC) *** 1/2

The Dick and The Rose (FringeNYC) **
Magdalen (FringeNYC) ***
Bombsheltered (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Paper Plane (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Rated M For Murder (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Mallory/Valerie (FringeNYC) *
Non-Equity: The Musical! (FringeNYC) *
Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
City Of Shadows (FringeNYC) ***
Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking ***
Salamander Starts Over (FringeNYC) ***
Pieces (FringeNYC) *
The Train Driver ***
Chaplin The Musical * 1/2
Detroit ** 1/2
Heartless at Signature **
Einstein On The Beach at BAM ****
Red-Handed Otter ** 1/2
Marry Me A Little **
An Enemy Of The People ** 1/2
The Old Man And The Old Moon *** 1/2
A Chorus Line at Papermill ***
Helen & Edgar ***
Grace * 1/2
Cyrano de Bergerac **
Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? ***
Disgraced **
Annie ** 1/2
The Heiress **
Checkers ** 1/2
Ivanov ***
Golden Child at Signature ** 1/2
Giant at the Public *** 1/2
Scandalous * 1/2
Forever Dusty **
The Performers **
The Piano Lesson at Signature *** 1/2
Un Ballo In Maschera at the Met *** 1/2 (singing) * (production) so call it ** 1/2
A Christmas Story: The Musical **
The Sound Of Music at Papermill ***
My Name Is Asher Lev *** 1/2
Golden Boy **
A Civil War Christmas ** 1/2
Dead Accounts **
The Anarchist *
Glengarry Glen Ross **
Bare **
The Mystery Of Edwin Drood ** 1/2
The Great God Pan ** 1/2
The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2

All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's *available* for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his *website* and his *daily blog*. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also *available* for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and *gain* access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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