

Theater: 'Almost Home' Never Arrives; 'Rococo Rouge' Never Goes There

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ALMOST HOME * 1/2 out of ****

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ACORN THEATRE ON THEATRE ROW

War is always with us, so a play about war -- any war -- will always be relevant, unfortunately. Almost Home is set specifically during the Vietnam War and sets up a dichotomy between the kid who has returned from 'Nam in pain and needing somehow to talk and his father, a tight-lipped veteran of World War II who has never talked about what he went through. How's that going for him? Not so good. Dad Harry (Joe Lisi) can't get through the day without drinking, might have hit his wife and is addicted to gambling and up to his neck in debt to a crooked cop called Nick Pappas (James McCaffrey).

Well, that's not going to happen to Johnny (Jonny Orsini), not if his mom (the great Karen Ziemba) has anything to say about it. She wants Johnny to go to college almost as much as his inspiring school teacher Luisa Jones (Brenda Pressley). Johnny's going to go to college and Harry is going to stop drinking (if only for a day or two) and start opening up. Their lives depend on it.

(copyright: Carol Rosegg)

That's the heart of Almost Home, a first play by Vietnam veteran Walter Anderson (who was also editor of Parade magazine for many years). This personal drama plays tug of war with the play's other, hard to swallow plot. That cop Nick has his own plans for Johnny, namely a spot on the police force. Why? Well, new Mayor John Lindsay plans to clean up the police, starting with a new chief of police. Nick's plan is to get Johnny into the police academy, have him sail through, get placed into Internal Affairs AND somehow be put in charge of overseeing Nick's area so that Johnny can protect Nick and his fellow bums from corruption probes.

That's almost as unlikely as Johnny's sullen father sharing his feelings, but you know before the show's over that we're going to hear sad stories about the horrors of war from both men. Unfortunately, Anderson's play is so blunt in laying all of this out that the actors can do little more than mouth their lines. No subtlety, no hint that these are real people with real problems ever comes through despite the talent present onstage.

Director Michael Parva can't really bring the story to life and the other tech elements follow suit: dutiful, fine but uninspired. Perhaps Pressley and McCaffrey come off best with their smaller turns, but that has much to do with them having less wooden dialogue to deliver. Lisi, Ziemba and Orsini do their level best. But good intentions and authentic details are no substitute for inspiration and originality. It is cruel to say we've seen it all before and dismiss someone's attempt to make sense of it all via drama. But all's fair in love and war, which is another way of saying nothing is fair.

ROCOCO ROUGE ** out of ****

COMPANY XIV (across from The Public)

Ah, burlesque. This art form has slowly moved its way into the mainstream in America, though it's never quite held the sway that it has in Europe. Raunchy, naughty fun certainly isn't the issue. Vaudeville -- a distinct but related bit of silliness -- has its share of ribaldry. And across the street from this new venue XIV is [Bridget Everett currently receiving raves for her out-there night of cabaret called Rock Bottom.](#)

So what to make of Rococo Rouge, the new offering from Company XIV, which makes much of its hedonistic namesake Louis XIV by mixing in snatches of opera amidst its pop songs and circus-like turns? Downtown spaces like The Slipper Room and The Box have hosted far more envelope-pushing nights of burlesque. [Acts like La Soiree have featured far more elaborate shows in bigger spaces.](#) And the polished professionalism of Moulin Rouge (echoed in its way by the squeaky clean Rockettes) is family friendly fare with top-notch talent.

Rococo Rouge is not quite any of these. It's in an intimate space which is not lavish enough to call upscale and not trashy enough to make you feel edgy. The humor and stunts on display wouldn't offend your grandmother. But it's not up to the precision heights of Moulin Rouge's guys and gals either. Nor are the stunts of the Cirque Du Soleil quality either. The result is neither fish nor fowl and something seemingly designed for an audience that doesn't quite exist.

(Photo by Phillip Van Nostrand)

Austin McCormick conceived, choreographed and directed this show, which launches the new bar and performing space for Company XIV. Perhaps the freedom of their own venue will allow him to experiment and become bolder in the future. Here, the tight confines of the stage don't allow much room and the limitations have not inspired him to innovation. The gender switch for a selection from Carmen makes little sense and few other dances even stick in the mind from one moment to the next, despite the game efforts of the folk onstage. Ditto the costumes which as with so much here are neither lavish nor tawdry enough to catch the eye.

The saving grace are the singers. Shelly Watson is the host and though her dialogue is tired and obvious, she does her best to whoop it up and delivers when asked to belt it out. It's a shame she and Brett Umlauf aren't allowed to sing their bits of opera without a microphone. The space is so tiny that surely projecting wouldn't be an issue and their vocals would be that more impressive. Best of all was Katrina Cunningham's pop turns on Daughter's "Youth" and the Britney Spears tune "Toxic." Cunningham's voice is distinctive and her covers solid. There's a lot of show to wade through to get to them but they're enjoyable nonetheless.

The low point is a tie. The very tired trotting out of "Is That All There Is?" as a finale no less -- which handsome dancer Davon Rainey can't rescue despite lip syncing while Watson sings -- is about as interesting as hearing "Royals" given the tiniest of spins. But that couldn't quite top the sight of a pole bar being set up at the lip of the stage and then sitting there while a crew member slid up and down to clean it off. Not even in the skeeziest strip clubs of my youth did I ever see them wipe down the stripper pole. If the performer using it is that germophobic, surely they should just do something else. At the very most, it could be cleaned backstage and then put in place by someone wearing gloves. Having the audience sit and watch this mundane task during what was supposed to be an elegant and risque night of fun was the perfect encapsulation of Rococo Rouge's confused identity crisis.

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