

Theater: The Funny & Smart Ann Richards Via Holland Taylor; Serious Clowning In *Old Hats*

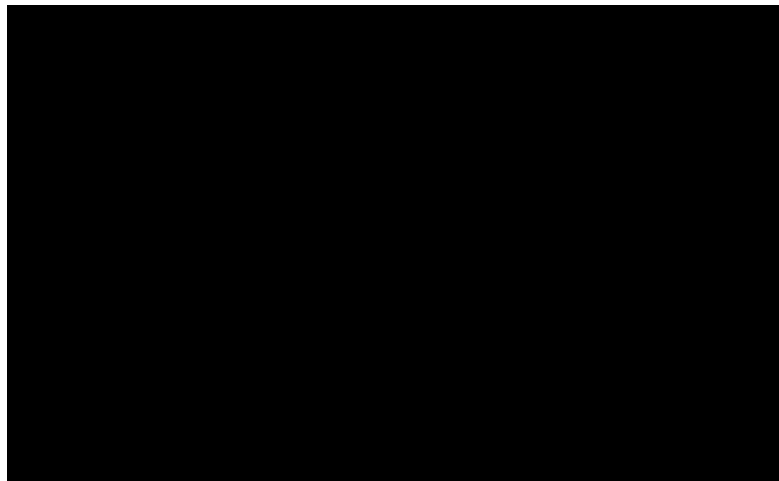
Posted: 03/08/2013 2:35 pm

ANN ** 1/2 out of ****
OLD HATS *** out of ****

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VIVIAN BEAUMONT THEATRE AT LINCOLN CENTER

Holland Taylor of TV's *Two And A Half Men* and *The Practice* has delivered a labor of love in this one-woman show about Ann Richards, the smart, savvy, tough as nails and very funny governor of Texas who stole the national spotlight when she gave the keynote speech at the 1988 Democratic National Convention. Taylor is very winning as Richards, managing to capture the distinctive personality of that memorable woman without ever stooping to mimicry. It's a pity the play she wrote for herself isn't nearly as good as that performance.

It begins with Richards delivering a commencement address and ends with Richards among the stars, in a sense. In between we get a strong dose of her humor, a good overview of her life and a very extended look at a day in the life of the Texas governor. Taylor is very affable and funny, especially in the stronger early portion where she's just telling her story to a group of graduates. Her hardscrabble childhood, her deep love for her father, her respect for her mother (a tougher woman than Ann) and her love of dirty jokes all come through. Richards is disarming as she describes moving from a small town to California and how the culture shock of being dropped into a school where kids of all races mingled ended any possibility of prejudice forever. She goes on to be a very focused housewife who is heavily involved in politics and helping others gain office... until one day the powers that be are short a nominee and suddenly look at Ann and think "hmmmm."



The tension drains from the show when it switches from that commencement address to wheeling out the governor's office and having Taylor talk on the telephone to all and sundry while chatting with her offstage secretary (the voice of Julie White). She bounces from needling an aide who messed up to arranging the family weekend trip to answering a phone call from President Bill Clinton ("Hey kid," she drawls) to debating with herself about whether to grant a stay in the execution of a prisoner.

Unfortunately, instead of glimpsing a day in the life of the governor it feels like we actually *spend* a day with the Governor as this section ends act one and extends into act two. Despite massed protests in front of the mansion about the coming execution, there's no drama in the flurry of phone calls covering countless topics, including Richards and her endless battles with a speechwriter prone to delivering copy at the last minute. This section desperately needed to be reshaped: it either should be much tighter and quicker to show Richards juggling eighteen issues at once or better yet crafted to show her not just working the phones but facing a crisis and letting that reveal her character and style of governing. Moment to moment Taylor is engaging but this is the bulk of the play and dramatically it goes nowhere, even though we are glad to know her son agrees to come to the weekend getaway despite his residual ire over a game of charades. ("Move on!" jokes Richards.)

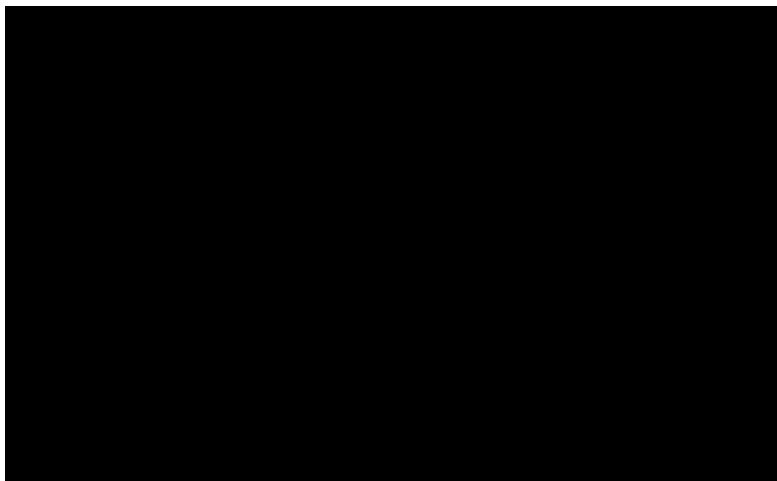
Then we move to an inspirational finale and say goodbye. It's a credit to Taylor that we feel like we've spent some time with Richards and would like to know more. It's a shame that this pleasant diversion doesn't work better as theater.

The tech elements and oversight by director Benjamin Endsley Klein don't help matters. The projection design by Zachary Borovay was especially distracting. Assuming there weren't technical issues that messed it up at the performance I attended, it was murky and odd. Richards was chatting to people with photographs from her hometown or childhood appearing in the background. However, those images were few and far between and soon they were replaced by dimly seen photographs that

came up or dissolved so slowly you wasted minutes trying to figure out what murky photo was being shown behind her. This happened repeatedly and in fact most of the time if a photo was used it was one of those shadowy half-images, perhaps in a misguided attempt not to draw attention away from Taylor. The result was a constant distraction. The governor's office by scenic designer Michael Fagin was more effective and essentially stayed out of the way. The return to a bare stage with flags and other starry backgrounds in the final passage was also unfortunate and didn't reach the abstract, one for the ages vibe they were aiming for.

As for her wig by Paul Huntley, it and the costume by Julie Weiss were spot-on. As Richards said in the show about her memorable white 'do, "I notice most of you guys who tease me about my hair, don't have any." Well heck, I know when I'm beat.

Here's the opening moments of Ann Richards at the 1988 DNC. Taylor effectively recreates this career highlight at the beginning of the show.



OLD HATS *** out of **** SIGNATURE THEATRE

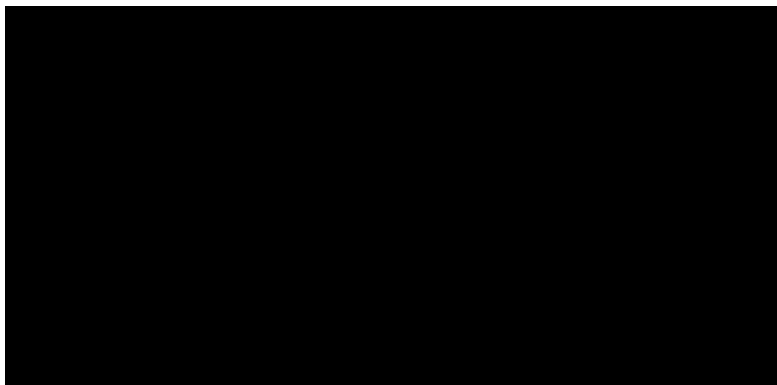
Old Hats is a delightful evening of clowning and vaudeville, marking the return of Bill Irwin and David Shiner exactly 20 years after they charmed the pants off everyone on Broadway in *Fool Moon*. It won't be a surprise if they're headed right back there with this confection but boy will you be lucky if you can see them in the intimate space of Signature Theatre. *Old Hats* is so good that you want it to be even better and with a little tightening and focus, it will be.

It begins dramatically with Irwin and Shiner running towards us as a giant rolling boulder a la *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* bearing down on them. Then they turn this way and seem to be running through a train tunnel and turn that way and are dodging flashing projectiles, all designed by Wendell K. Harrington. It's a quick statement of purpose: they are essentially silent clowns steeped in classic technique but ready to draw on technology to expand the form.

Suddenly, some noisy theatergoers burst in after the show has started and the audience soon realizes it is the band, led by not so secret weapon Nellie McKay. They soon find an engaging rhythm: McKay and her band offer musical support and scene-changing musical numbers so delightful you want them to continue, though you're just as eager to see what Irwin and Shiner have in store next. Those pieces range from "The Debate," in which two politicians wordlessly one-up each other (if one pulls out a hat with American flags on it, the other pulls out a bald eagle) to solo pieces.

The quality is very high here and perhaps everyone will have their own favorite moments. I loved the scene of two men waiting on a train platform: they get into an argument and as one makes his point he rises and rises to tower over the other who shrinks down. And then they reverse roles with the first man shrinking down and the other rising up, his neck seemingly made out of plastic. They're in complete sync here, playing off the dynamic they usually create of two men in competition.

Among solo pieces, I loved Shiner's "The Hobo," in which a forlorn wino finds romance with a woman he creates out of a plunger, a bit of cloth and an empty liquor bottle. Irwin's "Mr. Business" was also eye-popping as he updated a gag from *Fool Moon* involving television sets. This time, he interacts with video projections of himself seen on an iPhone, an iPad and looming over the entire scene. It's witty and beautifully timed, combining everything from the latest tablet technology to old school tricks like a slit in the back screen to allow him to be "swallowed" by his own projected head.



Irwin and Shiner are not a duo as such; they don't have classic clashing personalities that play off one another. But they do enjoy the tension of one-upping each other. Throughout the show they compete to out-flash each other in the ways they can toss their hats around, flipping them here and there and catching them on their heads. Even better is when one misses and the other gets to mock them mercilessly.

Perhaps the subtlest form of this rivalry came in a magic act bit. Shiner is a lothario of a magician, constantly hitting on women in the audience while Irwin in drag is his jealous assistant. Shiner is especially good here in his dead-pan portrayal of a man who thinks he is much more talented and charismatic than he actually is. It's also a scene that involves audience participation, an idea which reaches its peak in a silent movie bit where Shiner pulls three people out of the audience and gets them to reenact a showdown in a western saloon.

Throughout, McKay is a sunny, subversive presence. A sliver of a storyline emerges with both men competing for her attention and McKay expressing the hope that she might get a chance to dance at some point. Her interaction with the guys is delightful and her music, including some originals and a lot of tunes familiar to her fans fit smoothly in. A hard bop instrumental (highlighted by a solo of Tivon Pennicott) works great for "Mr. Business." And "Driftin'" -- which sounds like a 1930s gem -- is surely indicative of exactly why they thought of McKay for this old-fashioned evening. The subversiveness arises when McKay slides in unexpected twists such as "Mother Of Pearl" ("Feminists don't have a sense of humor," begins this droll masterpiece) and "Bodega," an ode to the classic New York corner store. ("Inner Peace" however has the wrong feel completely for this show and should be swapped out with something else.)

Her asides are hilarious and even during the intermission McKay charmed, wandering the aisles, playing her ukulele and breezily interacting with the crowd. When one man says that happily she's not lip syncing, McKay responded that she loves lip syncing -- "We should all lip sync through life!" she smiles.

She's such a delight, you can't help wishing for a little more. That modest storyline they introduce doesn't actually go anywhere. Perhaps just adding a beat or two, another little raising of the stakes, could lead to a more emotional finale where one or both or neither wins her hand. Instead she just leaves with the band and an abrupt, ineffective closing moment involves a bare bulb and those two old hats in the spotlight. Working with director Tina Landau, they could beef up the through-line (not the best choice of words given McKay's a vegan), bump up the presence of the protean, delightful McKay and provide a more fitting and elegant fade-out. But even in its present form, *Old Hats* is a rare treat to see two clowns in excellent form. I'll bet they're even better 20 years from now.

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 ***

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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