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Theater: "Bullet" Shoots Blanks; "Summer Shorts" Fall Short

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SUMMER SHORTS SERIES B ** out of ****
BULLET FOR ADOLF * out of ****

SUMMER SHORTS SERIES B ** out of ****
59 E 59

Theatrical shorts are a very forgiving format. When you're seeing three or four brief plays in an evening, you're often quite friendly. You don't dread a short play that doesn't immediately grab you -- hey, maybe it will get better and even if it doesn't, in 25 minutes you'll be watching something else! Perhaps that explains why I didn't mind this slight evening of playlets from artists of considerable talent.

Paul Rudnick provides a monologue for the very talented Peter Bartlett called "Cabin Pressure." Bartlett plays a flight attendant giving a speech when he receives the Medal of Freedom from the President for foiling a terrorist. We soon learn the really annoying passenger wasn't the terrorist but a hedge fund manager who kept being pushy and demanding and rude. We also learn our hero's partner is an out of work cake decorator who goes to AA and waves his hand whenever the flight attendant digresses, which is about once or twice a sentence. Oh, there are amusing lines. Rudnick is incapable of delivering a piece without some amusing lines and Bartlett squeezes every bit of humor out of it with impeccable timing. Thanking this and that person and "whomever is managing Lindsay Lohan" may be sort of amusing, but Rudnick can do this sort of thing in his sleep. And compared to his far superior work in the recent *Standing On Ceremony* collection of one-acts about gay marriage, this falls short. Still, there are worse ways of spending an evening than enjoying Bartlett nail his lines.

"Love and Real Estate" is a curious musical by two talents new to me. Sam Davis (music) is a top arranger and conductor with some intriguing composing work under his belt (like the upcoming *Bunnica*.) Sean Hartley (book and lyrics) has delivered some acclaimed work I didn't get a chance to see. This tale -- very vaguely linked to "The Three Little Pigs" -- is about three sisters who move to New York City and are preyed upon by a charming wolf who desires not their flesh but their fabulous apartments. (Any New Yorker can relate.) It's a rather static affair that heads exactly where you think it will, with a capable cast. They're all overshadowed by Edward Hibbert who plays the narrator and delivers the one distinctive number, a novelty piece called "Love and Real Estate" with his usual aplomb.

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"The Furies" is the final and least satisfying piece. However it also brings up the vagaries of live theater and small spaces. For some reason, multiple audience members in the back few rows seemed to exit and enter during this piece, creating a constant source of tension and interruption. Maybe that explains why the actors never seemed to find their rhythm in this moribund piece about an older man trying to break some news to an erstwhile boyfriend, who is shadowed by his angry, defiant sister. All three are distinct types and remain exactly true to form from beginning to end. The sister (Alicia Goranson) whispers into her brother's ear throughout until the finale where she lets loose with a long monologue about how she will make the older man's life miserable if he's lying to them. Unfortunately, that tirade is so repetitive and dull you don't feel the anger of a fury, just an impatience for something to happen you couldn't see a mile off. And while one must remember the especially fidgety audience for this particular performance, Victor Slezak as the older man was notably stumbling over his lines all night long.

And yet for all that, because it was a night of shorts and they were blessedly brief and the whole affair was over in 90 minutes, the evening was far less of a drag than it might have been at a single show of similar quality. A second set of shorts called Series A is also in rotation and reportedly received significantly kinder reviews.

BULLET FOR ADOLF * out of **** **NEW WORLD STAGES**

It would be nice to report that the talented performer Woody Harrelson's work as a co-writer and director was as his good as his acting. That ain't gonna happen but as flat as this comic drama fails, it is not faint praise to say it fails memorably and completely. It falls on its face but at least it *falls* rather than just sitting there, like so many other tepid tales. And as a director, Harrelson wisely encourages his actors to act their asses off. If it isn't working, you might as well let loose and make as much noise as possible.

The story is drawn very, very loosely from his days in construction before he made it big and is co-written with a buddy from those days, Frankie Hyman. It's set in 1983 as the pop music that blares loudly throughout the theater before the show begins makes abundantly clear. (Again, turn it up! What the hell!) Then come a barrage of clips containing pop cultural moments and highlights of that era, ranging from MTV to AIDS to Ronald Reagan and so on. At first it seemed desperate. Were they that worried we'd forget what year the play was set? But as the show progressed, the well-chosen barrage of clips proved the most entertaining segment so I actually looked forward to them.

The storylines hardly bear repeating since they're so confusing and convoluted. They seem like entirely separate tales; when the characters start bumping into each other, it's almost a shock. You've got a couple of guys working on a construction site for a dour German. One of them is fired and this dude, who insists he be called the "Dago-Czech" and dubs himself a brother to boot, declares he will get revenge. Actor Lee Osorio plays him with red meat verve; if Harrelson told the rest to turn it up to 11, Osorio decided 22 would be twice as good. Again, why not?


Then you've got one of the construction guys with a mild history of embezzlement named Frankie. He goes on a job interview and rather oddly starts to hit on the beautiful woman he's hoping to work for, raving about the sunset, barely bothering to describe his credentials before asking her on a date and so on. It's hard to describe how awkwardly unconvincing all this is. You think for a while they're trying for a certain tone or heightened reality or maybe Harrelson has some grander purpose, but in fact it's just weirdly off on every level. Throw in an 18 year old girl, a guy who may or may not be closeted and that German's antique Luger which was used to attempt an assassination of the Fuhrer and you've got yourself a play. Sort of. At least, the gun goes missing.

The first act ends with a frantic dinner party. Racial taunts are tossed out and dialogue is traded but none of it makes any sense -- none of it ever does. At one point a character laments the Germans doing him wrong and asks if it's all some sort of Teutonic plot. To which the 18 year old girl responds apropos of nothing that he better stop treating her like a little kid. Huh? You'll be saying that a lot if you go see *Bullet For Adolf*.

Despite the utter lack of logic here, the actors soldier on. The women come off better than the men, with Marsha Stephanie Blake delivering some humor as the no-nonsense Shareeta. The talented Shamika Cotton (such a hateful mother in *The Wire*!) has an appealing presence. And Shannon Garland almost makes some sense out of that 18 year old kid. The men have less success, with Tyler Jacob Rollinson as Frankie and Nick Wyman as Jurgen the German coming off best. And Imaginary Media delivered the video montages that are peppered throughout. I didn't think I wanted to see a string of old soda commercials, but darned if seeing Telly Savalas plug a pop didn't make me laugh.

Here's Woody Harrelson chatting about the play on *The View*.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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