
Theater: *Golden Boy* No Knockout; Katie Holmes in *Dead Accounts*

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GOLDEN BOY ** out of ****
DEAD ACCOUNTS ** out of ****

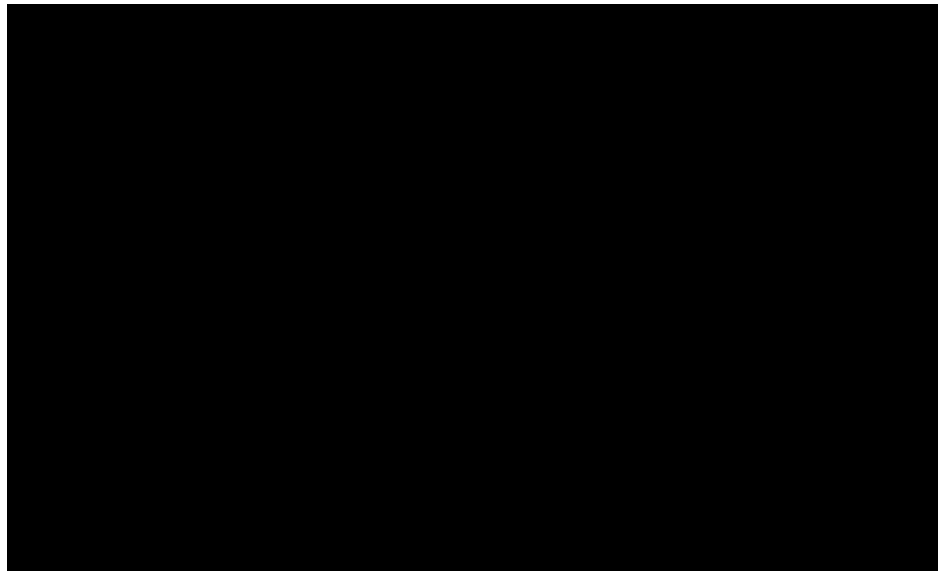
GOLDEN BOY ** out of ****
BELASCO THEATRE

Is the Clifford Odets play *Golden Boy* dated? Not especially, but it is rooted very much in the 1930s. Our hero Joe Bonaparte (Seth Numrich) is torn between two worlds: his father's world of immigrants who work hard versus the get-rich-quick American dream; the world of romance versus the world of sex; and the world of classical music versus the world of boxing.

The last is what stretches believability. Joe is a gifted violinist and his father (Tony Shalhoub) has scrimped and saved to purchase an extremely expensive instrument worthy of his son's talent and bright future. Joe has already won a New York City competition as the best violinist around (presumably amateur violinist, that is). So this isn't just wishful thinking. However, on the side Joe has apparently been scouting out boxing matches, learning techniques and practicing without anyone in his family being the wiser. Right.

When a fighter scheduled for a bout gets injured during practice, Joe muscles his way into the ring and immediately proves he's just as skilled at knocking out boxers as he is performing Bach. That's when the real tug of war begins: Joe's new manager Tom Moody (Danny Mastrogio) can see his meal ticket isn't wholly committed to boxing (the inevitable injuries will ruin Joe's ability to play the violin forever) and he's willing to use his mistress Lorna (Yvonne Strahovski) to woo Joe in any way necessary. She likes the kid, naturally, and before you know it there's a love triangle.

Maybe two: the gangster/financial backer Eddie Fuseli (Anthony Crivello) buys Joe tailored shirts and is referred to briefly as a queer, while Joe's trainer Tokio (a very good Danny Burstein) oils the kid down while calling him "honey" and "sweetheart" and is the only one who wants what's best for Joe -- and that includes the confused Joe himself. A different take on this play might have illuminated Joe's struggles over boxing versus music, the chip on his shoulder that makes Joe defensive and angry and seeing slights where none occur as having a more basic source. No such luck here.



It's a handsomely mounted revival by director Bartlett Sher with the sets and lighting by Michael Yeagan and Donald Holder especially effective in rooting us in the late 1930s. Catherine Zuber does well by the costumes, especially the flattering outfits for Strahovski.

But the play itself doesn't get under our skin. Today, of course, there's no tension between the world of high art and sports. Joe

thinks playing the violin is lame and won't make him a man in the eyes of the people he imagines think little of him. But on the flip side, we no longer see being a professional athlete as some sort of animalistic sell out, a blood sport for those incapable of achieving anything better. Far from it. Even in the 1930s there were famed violinists and certainly in the immigrant culture Joe was raised, that would have been highly prized. So it seems more like a choice to us -- what's he better at? which is he more likely to triumph in? -- than a life or death struggle for Joe's soul, which is what Odets intends.

Numrich is appealing early on as he talks his way into a bout. But his descent into living fast and maybe dying young (he drives a sports car like a maniac) is less convincing. The atmosphere created at the beginning is convincing, but every new character seems a little less realistic than the one before, a little more cliched, rather than living and breathing complex people. He's never played for laughs as such, but by the time the gangster Eddie Fuseli appears he seems more like a character from *Guys & Dolls* than the mean streets of New York. The gifted Shalhoub is the lone exception as he takes Joe's father from a stereotype at the beginning of the show to a convincing man with a broken heart at the end.

It doesn't help that classical music must battle boxing with one hand tied behind its back: we only hear Joe perform a brief bit of music off stage during one scene so his passion for it never really comes through. Boxing is always front and center, visceral and easy to capture in theatrical terms. We see athletes training, their bodies in peak condition. We see Joe and others rouse themselves up before a fight, planning strategy and motivating themselves to crush their opponent. We see them return to the locker room in triumph on a high of excitement. We hear the roar of the crowd. Virtually no time is spent on Joe's presumed love of music. Maybe it was always his dad's dream and not his, for all we know.

A boxer returns from the ring splattered in blood. A violinist? After a performance, maybe he stretches his fingers to relieve a cramp. Classical music never stood a chance.

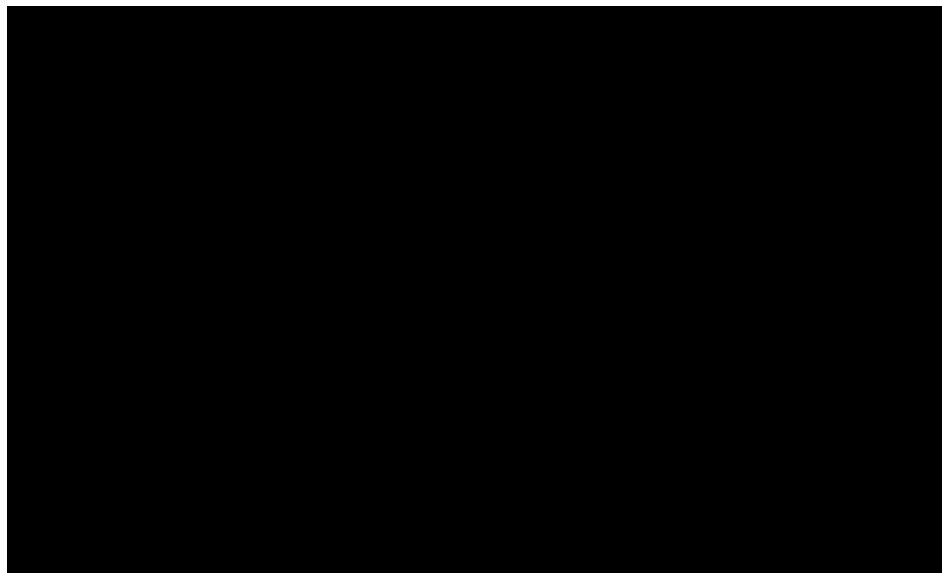
DEAD ACCOUNTS ** out of **** **THE MUSIC BOX**

It's easy to see why Theresa Rebeck's plays get produced on Broadway. They have a certain timely, commercial appeal that makes them sound like plausible audience grabbers. Broadway needs entertainments a la Neil Simon as much as it needs weighty fare and god knows it has plenty of musicals.

But having seen *Seminar* and now *Dead Accounts*, I've yet to be convinced that Rebeck comes up with much more than an arresting premise. In this case, it's the return of family black sheep Jack (Norbert Leo Butz), finding some solace in Cincinnati after life in New York City. Harried, upset, a bit manic (or is that just Butz?), Jack is clearly on the run from something, presumably a broken marriage to Jenny (Judy Greer), the wife that his family never really liked.

Jack has also lost his Midwestern sense of values, spending \$1,000 to convince a janitor at the local grocery store to open up after hours and sell him some ice cream, buying eight pies of pizza when one would do and so on. His sister Lorna (Katie Holmes) is worried, but she's got a lot on her plate. Lorna is living at home, rather pathetically she feels, but also needs to look after their mom (Jane Houdyshell, solid as always) and especially their dad, who suffers from kidney stones and needs constant care.

Hanging around to reconnect with his high school pal is Phil (Josh Hamilton), the guy who never left town and seems a bit schlubby but clearly has a good heart and those solid midwestern values Jack has lost track of. Phil has a thing for Lorna (who wouldn't) but is too timid to ask her out on a date. I can't approve of making Hamilton look frumpy and less handsome than he normally is but it works and Hamilton has fun tossing his hair and slumping around looking lovelorn and helpless.



That's about it, with the usual twists thrown in. The big one -- and it's hard to discuss the play without revealing this doozy from the end of the first act so skip the rest of this paragraph if you don't want a spoiler -- is that Jack has stolen \$27 million (or is it \$28 million; I forget and what's an extra million among friends?). He pulled it from "dead accounts," accounts filled with money no one has claimed. Jack's wife Jenny insists Jack give the money back but she mostly seems to want to get her fair share.

The bank really wants to know how Jack did it. His sister and mother are aghast (that's stealing! they say in shocked, Midwestern voices) and worry about jail. Jack knows that stealing \$27 can land you in jail, but that stealing \$27 million puts you in an entirely new category.

So a timely premise with various romantic entanglements or potential entanglements waiting to happen and it all comes to nought. Don't blame the actors: I missed Holmes in her Broadway debut but she's capable here. The odd joke might have landed more strongly and her big monologue (about planting a tree on Arbor Day) fell flat but that's truly the fault of Rebeck. Other monologues by other actors fell flat as well, wandering off as they fail to make a point. Butz does his darndest to gin up some energy and excitement, which is why he starts the play at "11" and never lets up.

But for sheer authorial confusion, let's focus on the central dynamic: Jack and his wife. When she arrives, we are told one thing and one thing alone about her: she is hateful. Jenny is unnecessarily rude to everyone (not even bothering to say "no thank you" to an offer of a glass of water), mocks their world relentlessly and is so stupid and disconnected from "real life" that the food disposal in the kitchen sink frightens the hell out of her and leaves her thoroughly confused. What is that, she wonders? If Jack has rejected her privileged world, we're with him.

Her pettiness and narrow-mindedness continues throughout the play. She wants the money. She wants her daddy not to be embarrassed (he got Jack the job at the bank, after all). She wants scandal to be avoided. That is until suddenly out of nowhere we are meant to believe she's really doing all this to help Jack. She truly loves him. He truly loves her and wants her back. Why? God knows, but he does. It goes against every bit of information we've learned about her and him. Usually in a romantic comedy or drama you might see bickering couples and know they're really perfect for each other and will realize their love by the end. In others, you enjoy seeing people who can't stand each other battle it out. Rebeck apparently wanted to create both at the same time or forgot how tiresome Jenny was and the result is deeply unsatisfying. You can see her confusion in various monologues, such as Jack's that ends the play on a muddled note.

Director Jack O'Brien clearly knew he had a mess on his hands and did what he could to desperately jazz up the proceedings. The transitions between scenes are a labored mess: people freeze in place while various renditions of "Sentimental Journey" play in the background and then the lights dim and people get to their marks while mysterious, brooding music by Mark Bennett swells up, sounding more fitting for Ibsen than whatever this work is meant to be.

The scenic design by David Rockwell of the kitchen where all the action takes place is as haphazard as Rebeck's writing, with exposed rafters for no purpose, a riotous explosion of fall leaves in the back windows clashing mightily with the green wallpaper and for some reason a blue velvet-looking material framing it all. It's garish and distracting throughout. The costumes by Catherine Zuber and hair by Tom Watson fare better, letting us know this isn't Manhattan without belaboring the point or going for cheap laughs.

It ends with a theatrical flourish that marginally connects with some of the monologues delivered before but is unearned, ineffective and confusing. You might wonder what the hell it was all about or, more to the point, what Rebeck intended. But not for long.

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

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