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## Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

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# Theater: Is Chris Rock Any F\*\*\*ing Good on Broadway?

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**THE MOTHERF\*\*KER WITH THE HAT** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

### SCHOENFELD THEATRE

Playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis hits Broadway with the very funny, solidly written show with a title that's NSFW: *The Motherf\*\*ker With The Hat*. Guirgis is one of the most talented and acclaimed writers around, having made waves with previous Off Broadway shows like *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*, *Our Lady of 121st Street* and *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. In the world of theater, he is a star.

Despite the excitement of seeing Guirgis coming into his own and getting the visibility of Broadway, it's not surprising that the show made it to Broadway in part because the producers cast actor and comedian Chris Rock in his Broadway debut. So the first question out of anyone's mouth is, "How is Chris Rock?" The answer: not bad.

Rock is a natural on the stage, of course. And when he's delivering his lines -- and he does deliver them, as opposed to simply saying them or fully inhabiting a character -- he's very convincing, especially when the great dialogue by Guirgis allows Rock to deliver hilarious lines about sleeping with a friend's girl and how they're not actually friends but it wasn't cool of him to do anyway.

The problem comes when Rock *isn't* talking. Then he seems to freeze a bit onstage and not offer anything

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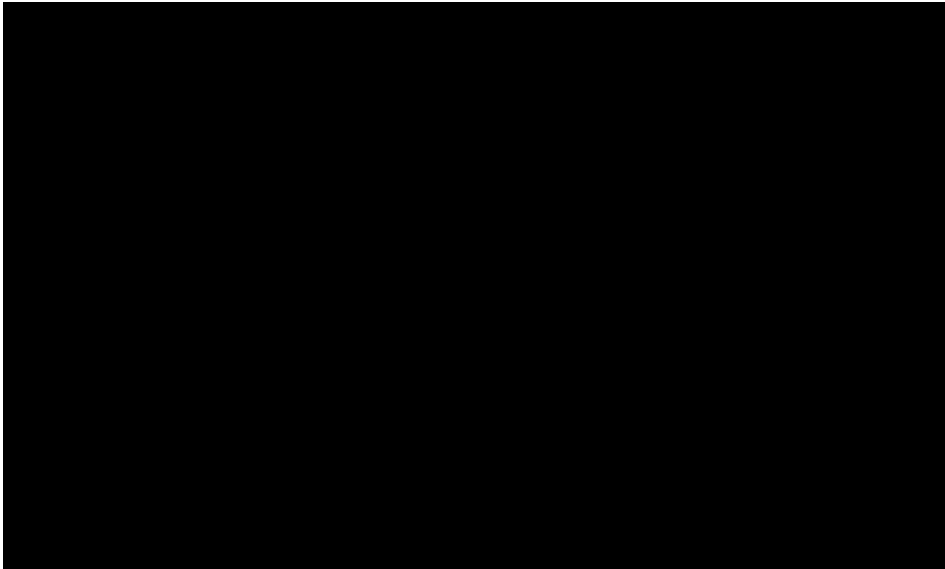
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for the other actors to play off. Rock projects well (no small thing in a Broadway house, but years of stand-up took care of that) and hey, performing live is very, very different from acting on film. Greater skill and the ability to inhabit a character even when that character isn't talking might come with time and a lot more work. He acquits himself admirably if you grade on a scale. It seems clear that Rock's presence in a key role perhaps keeps the show from reaching its peak artistically. But he's not a dead weight either and unlike other celebrities turned thespians, fans can enjoy seeing him without worrying about whether he'll remember his lines or embarrass himself. Not at all.

It helps immeasurably that Rock is surrounded by an excellent cast and performing in a very funny and involving work. Even if the title isn't one you'd want to repeat to your mother. Here's the cast discussing it with Broadway World.



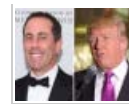
Rock plays the AA sponsor of Bobby Cannavale's Jackie, a guy just out of prison and on the right track. He's not drinking anymore, his girlfriend is hot and he's just landed a job with possibilities of "career advancement." Then he spots the hat. Whose hat is sitting on the table in their apartment? His girlfriend (a confident, sexy Elizabeth Rodriguez) reacts angrily. How the hell is she supposed to know whose hat it is? What does it matter? How could he doubt her? He has insulted her! In other words, when cornered, she goes on the attack and tries to drive the idea of infidelity out of his mind.

Soon we see Jackie meeting with his sponsor, crashing on the guy's couch and avoiding the advances of Rock's wife (Annabella Sciorra). He buys a gun and shoots the hat in front of the guy he *thinks* was cheating on his girl. That creates more problems (the guy is on probation, after all) and soon he's hiding the gun at the home of his weird cousin Julio (a scene-stealing Yul Vazquez).

Friendship, trust and insecurity all come into play. Is Jackie to blame for his girlfriend's cheating because he proved time and time again that she couldn't depend on him? Are people in 12 step programs hypocrites if they backslide in other parts of their lives? Or is Rock as Ralph D. correct when he says all that AA is trying to do is keep him from drinking and drugging? It doesn't turn people into saints and doesn't even try, he says.

Cannavale is the heart of the show as he struggles to control his temper and angrily rejects any idea that cheating around doesn't really matter in the end. It matters and Cannavale is marvelously good at mining all the humor and pathos out of Jackie's desperate desire to hold it together while also yearning for revenge. Another Tony nomination is clearly in the works. So is one for Vazquez, who plays Cousin Julio. Is Julio gay or straight? I'm still not quite certain but I know that Vazquez is hilariously good with his precise line readings and repeated offers to get all "Van Damme" on the people messing with Jackie. Director Anna D. Shapiro molds the performances into one cohesive whole that reveals the pain at the heart of Jackie but never misses a chance for humor.

The great jazz artist Terence Blanchard provides the music, mostly brief bits of score played during scene changes. His film and TV work is often exceptional but Blanchard may have been frustrated about the minimal opportunities this show offered and his work is undistinguished and even a little murky. Even less praise can be offered for the scenic design by Todd Rosenthal. The quick changes from one



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apartment to the next are all fine. But the set is dominated by a sliver of skyscraper skyline and a wholly unnecessary, even confusing metal structure that seems to be the back of a billboard sign without any advertising on it. It certainly gets across the idea of an urban landscape but is so dominating and yet vague (at first I thought it was a drawbridge) that you're continually distracted by it.

The exact opposite is true of the writing by Guirgis. It's solidly built and every line, every scene has a purpose. He's a genuine talent and it's great to see him on Broadway where he belongs.

#### THE 2010-2011 THEATER SEASON (ratings on a four star system)

Angels in America revival at Signature \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

Anything Goes \*\* 1/2

Arcadia with Billy Crudup \*\*\* 1/2

Bengal Tiger At The Baghdad Zoo \*\*

Between Worlds/Entre Mundos \* 1/2

Beautiful Burnout at St. Ann's Warehouse \*\*

Blood From A Stone \*\* 1/2

The Broadway Musicals Of 1921 at Town Hall \*\*\*

Cactus Flower \*

Catch Me If You Can \*\*\* 1/2

Devil Boys From Beyond \*\*

The Diary Of A Madman with Geoffrey Rush at BAM \*\*\*

The Divine Sister \*\*\* 1/2

Double Falsehood \*\*

The Dream Of The Burning Boy \*\* 1/2

Driving Miss Daisy \*\*

Elf \*

Elling \*\*

A Free Man Of Color \*\* 1/2

Gatz \*\*\*

Ghetto Klown \*\*\*

Good People with Frances McDormand \*\*

The Grand Manner \*\*

The Great Game \*\*\*

Gruesome Playground Injuries \*\*\*

The Hallway Trilogy: Nursing \*\*

The Hallway Trilogy: Paraffin \*\*\*

The Hallway Trilogy: Rose \*\*\*

How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying \*\*\*

The Importance Of Being Earnest \*\* 1/2

The Interminable Suicide Of Gregory Church \*\*\* 1/2

John Gabriel Borkman \* 1/2

La Bete \*\* 1/2

Les Miserables \*\*\*

Lombardi \*\*

Macbeth with John Douglas Thompson \*\*

The Merchant Of Venice \*\*\* 1/2

Middletown \*\*\*

Mike Birbiglia's My Girlfriend's Boyfriend \*\*\*

The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore \*

Mistakes Were Made \*\* 1/2

The Motherf\*\*ker With The Hat \*\*\*

Nixon In China \*\*\* 1/2

The New York Idea \*\*

The Nightingale and Other Short Fables at BAM \*\*\*

Other Desert Cities \*\*

Our Town with Helen Hunt \*\*\*

The Pee-wee Herman Show \*\*\*

Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert: The Musical \* 1/2

The Road To Qatar \*

Room \*\*\*

The Scottsboro Boys \*\*\*\*



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Antoine Dodson Arrested For Marijuana Possession  
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**Small Craft Warnings zero stars**

Three Sisters (w Maggie Gyllenhaal and Peter Sarsgaard) \*\*\* 1/2

Timon Of Athens at Public with Richard Thomas \*\*\*

The Whipping Man \*\*

Wings \*\*

Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown \*\*

**AT THE NEW YORK MUSICAL FESTIVAL**

Blood Ties \*\*\*

Fellowship \* 1/2

Fingers and Toes \*\* 1/2

Frog Kiss \*\*\* 1/2

The Great Unknown \*\* 1/2

Nighttime Traffic \*\*

Our Country \*

PopArt \*

Shine! The Horatio Alger Musical \*\* 1/2

Show Choir \*\*

Tess: The New Musical \*\*

Trav'lin' \*\*\*

Without You \*\*\* 1/2

\*\*\*\*\*

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 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 was provided with tickets to this shows with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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