

# Theater: Mia Farrow's Broadway Return; LaBute's Cheap 'Shot'

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**BROOKS ATKINSON THEATRE**

Playwright A.R. Gurney is a talent I've only recently been able to see performed and I like him more all the time. (A fine revival of his play *The Wayside Motor Inn* is [currently offered by Signature through October 5.](#)) Of his many works, surely the produced most often is *Love Letters*. It's disarmingly simple in conceit and execution. Two actors sit on stage and read the letters their characters have sent to each other. The man and the woman are at first a boy and a girl, two kids of privilege thrown together for the girl's birthday party (presumably in part because their parents know each other), exchanging thank you notes for the gift given and then a thank you note for the thank you note.

That turns into a decades-long exchange of intimacies and friendship, a mashup of *Same Time Near and 84 Charing Cross Road*. We see her evolve into a committed liberal and committed artist and sometimes just committed full stop. We see him evolve into a decent, more conventional man with a somewhat mysterious romance in the Far East followed by marriage, law and then a political career.

Will their friendship ever slide into love? Will they both find happiness? Can they find happiness without each other? Or is their intimacy possible precisely because it's played out in love letters?

Gurney has crafted a solid, almost fail-safe entertainment. The letters slide into conversations at certain, brief moments to speed the story along in a reasonable manner. Still, the central pleasure is watching their stories ping pong back and forth letter by funny, challenging, sweet, blunt letter. And letters that get no response prove that silence can be awfully powerful too.

Mia Farrow hasn't been on Broadway in a run since 1980 (setting aside a benefit performance of *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf*). She's up to the modest challenges here and delivers a florid, flighty butterfly of a performance. To me it seemed too melodramatic...until the play itself became a bit melodramatic towards the end and Farrow's choices proved more justified than I expected. Nonetheless, the various pairings of actors that pepper the show throughout its run are half the pleasure here. Certainly Diana Rigg (opposite Stacy Keach) will offer up a very different take on the part.

Brian Dennehy of course is a rock, a solid counterpoint to Farrow's work that nicely underplays the ultimate tension between these two very different people united by their epistolary friendship. Director Gregory Mosher has guided them nicely and the result is a satisfying albeit modest evening of theater. Still, there may be more here than first meets the eye (or in this case, the ear). I keep thinking about other combination of actors and what they might do with this work. Maybe the best way to appreciate *Love Letters* is to see it again.

**THE MONEY SHOT** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**MCC THEATER**

How churlish to say you went to a comedy, you laughed pretty consistently and yet not rave about the show! And yet, that is the natural response to *The Money Shot*, a new play by Neil LaBute that takes easy if often amusing potshots at Hollywood and some very dumb actors.

Typically, LaBute has a catchy premise to his plays, often presented with a twist when you realize what is really going on. Here, however, the premise is quite obvious though delayed as if it might shock us. Two actors and their significant others are meeting to discuss a delicate issue. Steve (Fred Weller) and Karen (Elizabeth Reaser) are the movie stars holding desperately on to their level of fame as younger versions of themselves sprout up seemingly everywhere. Karen's true love is Bev (Callie Thorne), her smart and she knows it girlfriend/lover/partner who is a top film editor. Steve's wife Missy (Gia Crovatin) is a would-be actress hounded by her far more famous husband over her weight, but, you know, for her own good.

The apparent elephant in the room is what exactly they've all come together to discuss: Steve and Karen are filming a major movie and their director wants them to actually have sex during their big sex scene. What specifically are their partners comfortable with? Oddly, the play keeps coy about this simple issue for quite a while, though we assume or somehow sense what is going on and are hardly traumatized by the idea. The tension of debating what is kosher for all four soon raises issues of trust and exactly how stable these relationships truly are. And along the way, you'll laugh pretty consistently.

Steve and Bev hate each other at first sight. And it doesn't help that Bev finds it impossible to hear him spout nonsense (like claiming David Crosby was the son of Bing Crosby or wondering if Belgium is part of Europe) without correcting him. At length. Meanwhile, Missy is so hungry she shoves appetizers into her mouth whenever Steve isn't looking. And Karen unleashes some pointed barbs at Bev while acting the vain star with relish à la Dianne Weist in *Bullets Over Broadway*.

*The Money Shot* has no problems as such. It's a simple premise with some good laughs elevated by a very strong cast. The scenic design by Derek McLane offers all sorts of opportunities for clever staging by director Terry Kinney and the other elements follow suit nicely. But Hollywood stars are low hanging fruit when it comes to cheap shots. And these particular Hollywood stars are so dumb it beggars belief. Bev is the sole person with the slightest bit of intelligence and her isolation isn't played for all the laughs it might be.

Similarly, Steve may be the only male actor in Hollywood who averts his eyes when two women kiss. But the suggestion of his right-wing leanings (he watches FOX News) hardly comes into play until an inevitable rant where Kevin unleashes his real opinions. And of course since Missy seems the ditziest of all, you just know she'll make some wise observation or prove far more savvy at some key moment by the finale.

Despite its mildly outlandish premise, *The Money Shot* feels awfully familiar. Happily, LaBute attracted a good cast that makes the most of his work here. Crovatin has the least interesting role but does her game best. Thorne is always good and here plays frustration quite well, though it's almost impossible to understand what her character is doing with the tiresome Karen in the first place, undercutting any tension over what might become of them. Weller is amusingly indifferent to facts and makes Steve an actual character rather than the caricature he might easily become with a lesser actor in place. And Reaser should join rehearsals late on every show (as she had to do here). Her work is loose and very fun indeed. Karen actually is a caricature, but Reaser makes her a fun one.

The show builds to a silly climax I enjoyed and an unsurprising twist most will see a mile away. To be plain: there's no money shot in *The Money Shot*. But so what? Sometimes an evening with nothing more than pleasant foreplay can be quite satisfying.

## THEATER OF 2014

[Beautiful: The Carole King Musical](#) \*\*\*