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Theater: New Comic Play *The Ugly One* Only Goes Skin Deep

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The Ugly One ** out of ****
Soho Rep

Beauty is skin deep and so are the conceits in this high concept, low content comedy. The play by Marius von Mayenburg sounds very Neil LaBute-like in description. Lette, the valued engineer of a brand new 2CK electrical plug, is dismayed to find out he won't be presenting the product at a convention. Instead, it will be his assistant, a gloried coffee getter who doesn't even have a degree.

Both the assistant and Lette's boss are confused by his reaction. Surely Lette understands why he couldn't possibly be the face of this important new product? Surely he knows? Knows what? That he is exceptionally... ugly.

Our hero goes home to find out his wife feels the same way. She loves him but never looks him directly in the face, not if it can be helped. They make love, presumably, in the dark. Dismayed, Lette goes in for radical plastic surgery. The result is a new face that is unexpectedly beautiful.

How would someone react to that? An interesting play might have trod a different path but *The Ugly One* takes the obvious course: Lette is swarmed by women who want to sleep with him and becomes quite a jerk. When the doctor starts performing the surgery on other people, they all look exactly like Lette's new face so "copies" of him start popping up everywhere. This annoys him to no end, though by the end of the play he's inexplicably attracted to another man who looks like him, though before that he's been furious at every sighting.

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The Twilight Zone and countless other works of imagination have played with ideas of beauty and cloning and how people might react. *Twilight* episode "Number 12 Looks Just Like You" showed a superficial, sex-obsessed world where a girl who doesn't want to get surgery to look identical to everyone else is finally bludgeoned into doing it. The result is unnerving, bland conformity and we're dismayed when the girl is pleased. In "The Eye Of The Beholder," we know a woman is desperately trying to get plastic surgery to end her extreme deformity. The punch line appears when she's revealed to be beautiful but we're told the surgery has failed: everyone else is hideous so the ideas of beauty on her world are radically different.

I suppose *The Ugly One* has some comment on beauty and superficiality to make but it's too straightforward and unsurprising to offer even the modest insight of those TV episodes. Since the play itself is muddled, it's not surprising this production is as well, with director Daniel Aukin sometimes allowing a broad comic tone and other times a seriousness of purpose to prevail. The cast is generally game, though the material and direction keep their work from cohering.

Steven Boyer had a great success recently in *Hand to God* (which returns February 29) and he has moments here in dual roles of the lab assistant and the gay son of a wealthy, dominating female business owner that sleeps with Lette. I'm not quite sure why they gave him scraggly, unattractive facial hair but I am sure why he speaks in a low, oddly distinctive voice as the assistant. It's simply so our hero can have a meltdown and argue with himself at the finale and we can distinguish his "good" side from the "bad" side that sounds like the assistant. It was not a good choice.

Lisa Joyce has fun as the wife and the elderly businesswoman, playing one straightforwardly and the other in a broad, farcical style that scores some laughs but again keeps the play off kilter and from ever finding the right tone throughout. Tossed in bits of incest and crude sexuality that don't really build on the play's ideas seem there just to provoke. Andrew Garman is good as both Lette's boss and the plastic surgeon.


Alfredo Narcisco has the most consistent performance style as Lette, helped by the fact that he plays only one role. He's good-looking, so the early scenes have an interesting disconnect when he's told how ugly he is. Narcisco gets his laughs by treating this seriously, which is surely the right way to go. But the dramatic finale -- which combines potential suicide with a Caryl Churchill-like attempt at word play and an emotional meltdown -- is far too muddled as written for him to pull it off.

Ultimately, the piece is not ugly or pretty enough to be memorable. *Cyrano* could turn even a giant nose into a distinctive advantage. But here the concept and story of *The Ugly One* is too bland to make an impression, even a bad one.

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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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