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THE BLOG

Theater: 'Skeleton Crew' X-Rays Detroit; 'Noises Off' and Some Laughter On

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SKELETON CREW *** out of ****

NOISES OFF ** out of **** but *** or *** 1/2 if you've never seen it before

SKELETON CREW *** out of ****

ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY

Playwright Dominique Morisseau triumphantly concludes her Detroit trilogy with *Skeleton Crew*, a look at a fading automobile plant in the winter of 2008. Obama has become President, but the car industry is reeling, something that's readily apparent for the shift workers of one of the smallest remaining factory lines in town. Times are tough and getting tougher: shifts are being cut, everyone is a paycheck or two away from the streets and Reggie has made the leap from factory floor to supervisor. That's enough responsibility to leave him stranded: management still sees him as a black man with one foot on the floor while most of the people on the floor see him as the Man, always trifling with them over minor infractions no matter how good their work on the line may be.

Is life tense? Always. Michael Carnahan's excellent production design brings that to life immediately as we sense the worn-down despair of the break room, a space lined with battered lockers, a fridge, a coffee pot, the clock for punching in and an apparently endless stream of signs pronouncing rules like NO SMOKING and NO GAMBLING or stating that anyone's bag might be searched at any time.

That sign about no smoking is directed at Faye (Lynda Gravatt), who blithely lights up and blows smoke in its direction right at the start of

the show. She's the union rep for her crew and abides enough by the rules to stop smoking when supervisor Reggie (Wendell B. Franklin) walks in, but not enough to actually NOT smoke on her break. Sometimes, it's just too damn cold outside. Unfortunately, it's getting colder.

Her co-workers include Dez (Jason Dirden) and the very pregnant Shanita (Nikiya Mathis). With an economy of words, Morisseau sets up a host of storylines battling for our attention. The plant is indeed closing, but Reggie confides in Faye and asks her not to tell anyone. But it's her job as the union rep to demand management help employees prepare for the transition. And when Shanita says she's been offered a job at a copy store but will turn it down because working on cars means too much to her, the tension for Faye is palpable. This isn't some battle between management and unions over rules and who gets what. This is about people's lives.



Shanita has a teasing, friendly relationship with Dez, but is he really the man she wants in her life? Dez is packing a gun to work, though whether that's just due to the lawless aura of Detroit at the time or a hint he's tied the spate of thievery plaguing auto plants, we can't be sure. We know Faye sees Reggie as almost a son, certainly a better son than the one that rejected her for being lesbian. But our knowledge of the collapsing economy (not to mention the irony that Detroit would come roaring back...after firing countless employees and squeezing out concessions from unions *before* posting record profits in 2015) makes the drama on display take on the aura of inevitable tragedy. The choices don't seem to be between right and wrong but between bad and worse.

Morisseau's play is unquestionably a strong, formidable work. Having seen *Detroit '67*, I would love to see the entire trilogy mounted and soon. Director Ruben Santiago-Hudson has crafted an excellent production that does it full justice, especially with a faultless cast. The

tech elements are strong as well -- from Paul Tazewell's costumes to the lighting of Rui Rita to the score and sound design of Robert Kaplowitz and the original songs of Jimmy Keys, songs so good I half assumed they were oldies I was unfamiliar with.

In a bold stroke, dancer Adesola Osakalumi sets the tone immediately with his choreographed dance moves as a "mechanized" worker on the factory floor. In one gesture, the show recognizes the march of robotics not to mention how workers are seen as cogs in a machine without belaboring either point. On the down side, Osakalumi offers a visual break to early scenes and then disappears for a stretch of time in act one. When he returned, I'd almost forgotten about him. This may be one reason the first act played a bit long. In act two, his presence is welcome and consistent, though it should also be noted he was doing his bits while we could see actors getting into place, allowing his performance to be recognized as not just "filler" killing time, whereas in act one he was often the only person we could see clearly. Further, when he's quietly tapped on the shoulder towards the end of the show, it seemed to echo the firings taking place, which made his reappearance at the end of the scene even more confusing. A consistent approach to when he appears might make the whole show flow more smoothly.

Further, the small space available might have lessened the impact of the visuals deployed by projection designer Nicholas Hussong; mostly they felt beside the point. Deployed along the frame of the set, they didn't get in the way when shown during scene changes but weren't the plus they might have been, either. And while Shanita had two of the show's best monologues (an ode to the days when people knew how to merge on the highway and her love of being part of building cars), I must admit the character Mathis played went in and out of focus for me once or twice. At times she seemed very smart, at other times a little silly. Finally, without revealing the climax, I didn't care for some late show plot twists. It's hardly a happy ending, but *Skeleton Crew* seems built for tragedy -- in a way, too many of the characters are given a modest reprieve when what it really calls for is, sadly, to crush them down.

But these are cavils I note when wondering why perhaps *Skeleton Crew* doesn't immediately hit the heights of greatness. It's a good play with a great cast and one theatergoers won't want to miss. All four leads are by and large impeccable, with Dirden and Franklin two terrific foils for one another, while Mathis captures Shanita's sweetness with ease and Gravatt so good as the world-weary Faye you wonder if we can start adding "the great" to her name. It's a skeleton crew on the

line, but Morisseau has put flesh and bone on the people who work that line and done it with grace.

[NOISES OFF](#) ** out of **** but *** or even *** 1/2 if you've never seen it before

[ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY AT AMERICAN AIRLINES THEATRE](#)

Have I ever told you about the time I saw the original production of *Noises Off* in London? I joined my mother for my first trip overseas. She was there as a tennis umpire working Wimbledon. We attended a warm-up tournament and then of course the fortnight. While she worked constantly, we booked plenty of time for tourist-y things for me including -- naturally -- theater. What did I want to see, she asked? I was just 16, it was the summer of 1982 and it hadn't opened yet in New York City but I knew *Cats* was a big hit. "Eww! I don't want to see a show about cats!" she shuddered, never being much of a pet person.

No, she chose...*No Sex Please, We're British*, an absolutely dreadful British farce that was panned by critics -- back in 1971! This wasn't a revival; it was the same production. Somehow, it continued to run and run and run until finally exhausting even the British desire for lowbrow humor whenever *Are You Being Served* wasn't airing on TV and finally closed in 1987. Unfortunately for me, that was five years too late and we saw it. The show was pitiful, I was peevish and halfway through my mother said I could choose the next one, no questions asked. (Though not *Cats*.)

Somehow I knew enough to pick *Noises Off* and we got tickets. Little did I realize that seeing that miserable umpteenth performance of *No Sex Please, We're British* was the perfect way to set up Michael Frayn's delicious spoof of farce and the life of actors. I might not have appreciated it as much if I hadn't just endured *No Sex Please*. Even better, I hadn't a clue as to what the show actually did, so its extremely clever script was a complete surprise. If you don't know how the show works, by all means, go see the current Roundabout revival and stop reading now.

So if you're still reading, you know: act one is a late night rehearsal of a dreadful farce and act two takes place behind the scenes (the entire set revolves) as we hear the farce being performed offstage and watch the cast and crew silently enact petty jealousies, romances, misunderstandings and the like that have disastrous effects on the play being performed out of view. Act three shows us the play being performed one last time with our full knowledge of the sort of anarchy taking place offstage and the disastrous result for audiences. *Noises*

Off starts amusingly, builds hilariously upon itself in act two and then triples the fun in act three. That original production remains one of the fondest memories of my theater-going life.

I almost didn't bother seeing the ill-fated 2001 Broadway revival. Nothing could compete with the original and I really didn't want to spoil my memories. Coming on the heels of 9-11 certainly didn't help. Somehow it ran almost a year but few felt it did the play justice.

And here we are again. Jeremy Herrin directs a pitch perfect cast and really I have no complaints. The actors are committed and create specific, real characters, which can and should make the comedy funnier. They're not just delivering broad comedy here. Andrea Martin is ideal as the veteran star having an affair with a much younger cast member, Megan Hilty is fun as the dumb blonde (God help you if you can't have fun in this show), Jeremy Shamos is amusingly pitiful as the sad sack prone to nose bleeds, David Furr delicious as the dim-wit constantly interrupting rehearsals to make vague pronouncements, Daniel Davis (always of *The Nanny* for me) especially good as the alcoholic actor always searching for the bottle, Kate Jennings Grant calm and beautiful as the voice of reason, Campbell Scott rakish as the director of this dreadful troupe and Tracee Chimo stuck in the rather thankless role of playing the rather thankless role of a jack of all trades assistant/backstage manager.

I watched their performances with admiration and respect. (Rob McClure still escapes my imagination, but he did display a rather hilarious gift for shaking that serves his stage-shy crew member well.) The audience roared with pleasure. My guest -- who worked on the show in college and liked everyone (while insisting she could do a better job as the hapless actress Brooke) -- absolutely leapt to her feet

at the end, a rarity for that jaded theater-goer.

I certainly had a fine time and enjoyed it much more than the revival of 2001. But somehow, it left me cold. Is *Noises Off* one of those shows whose pleasures depend on that first viewing? There's absolutely nothing wrong with that, though of course a truly great work should reward repeated viewing, not dim. But heck, how many shows are this funny even one time around? I'm positively flummoxed as to my own personal reaction to this production. All I can say is that I'll never be 16 again. But if you've never seen *Noises Off*, by all means don't hesitate to check it out. If you do, the next revival will pale in comparison because apparently, you never forget your first time.

THEATER OF 2016

[*Employee Of The Year*](#) (Under The Radar at Public) ***

[*Germinal*](#) (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

[*Fiddler On The Roof*](#) 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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