

August 29, 2012

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Theater: *Streetcar Named Desire* Is a Local, Not Express; *One Man, Two Guvnors* Three Cheers

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A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE ** out of ****
ONE MAN, TWO GUVNORS *** out of ****

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE ** out of ****
BROADHURST THEATRE

This is not *A Streetcar Named Desire* simply cast with black actors in the lead roles. It is a *Streetcar* untraditionally cast but in a way that is true to New Orleans, where blacks and whites and Latinos live together in a gumbo of love and desire and conflict. It's welcome, if nothing else, for showcasing Nicole Ari Parker, who I know best from her sharp and funny supporting turn in *Boogie Nights* and the Showtime series *Soul Food*. Parker almost puts her own stamp on Blanche and proves her Broadway debut is a notable one.

Unfortunately, it comes in a production that doesn't begin to allow Parker's performance to flourish and deepen. Blair Underwood -- also making his Broadway debut -- is thoroughly miscast as Stanley. He projects none of the violence or animal nature of this man (his tears of remorse are much more convincing than the off-stage beating of his wife) and despite his good looks there is no sexual tension in the air. In fact, when Stanley rapes Blanche in act two, it seems to come out of nowhere and lead to nowhere, much like the streetcar that has taken Blanche to the end of the line.

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Parker is especially strong in the first act, where her Blanche is a Southern belle without being flighty and too-fragile from the get-go as Blanches often are. She doesn't seem bizarrely out of place, some exotic flower doomed to die. In fact, a fine Daphne Rubin-Vega is convincing as Blanche's sister Stella, when in many shows the two women seem to come from different universes. Parker flirts with Stanley but it isn't real flirtation, just the sort of harmless flattery women indulge in when they believe that's how best to get what they want. Stanley isn't attracted or repelled by her coyness. He's indifferent.

The same is not true of Mitch. It's fun to see Wood Harris of *The Wire* in the role of this timid mama's boy. Their scenes of romance together are the most convincing human connection in the show. Blanche's plan to start over with him doesn't seem like a fantasy but a pretty good idea for both of them.

But whatever groundwork is laid in act one fails to pay off in act two. Harris is less effective in his drunken revenge on Blanche and her aria where Blanche confesses every tawdry detail of her fall doesn't have the power it should. Since there's no explosive sexual tension, Stanley's brutal attack comes out of nowhere and makes little sense. Blanche's final goodbye doesn't have the poignancy and heartbreak it should. She is more betrayed than shattered.

Directed by Emily Mann, this *Streetcar* has little sense of place despite all the usual trappings. In one of the show's biggest disappointments, the music composed by the terrific Terrence Blanchard is merely a bridge between scenes, squawking in effectively at some key moments but essentially just a mood-setter. It doesn't have the impact of embodying the turmoil underneath the drama, perhaps because the drama isn't providing any. Blanchard often does much better.

Similarly, the world of New Orleans is hardly present. A jazz funeral crosses the stage, people go here and there and an unnecessary and unconvincing video projection hints at stores and other businesses, but it never coheres into a community. Stanley and Stella's place is more rundown than raffish and with little of the charm that New Orleans has even at its most beat-down. (The serviceable set is by Eugene Lee.) Stanley's buddies who come over for poker barely make an impression; the same could be said for the neighbors who live above them, always fighting and making up and fighting again. With no world to set this story in, no community to surround it and no raw passion and danger to inflame it, the ride on this *Streetcar* is all too smooth.

[ONE MAN, TWO GUVNORS](#) *** out of **** [THE MUSIC BOX](#)

If you want a crash course in what makes the British laugh, don't head to London, head to Broadway. See *Peter and the Starcatcher* for its loving nod to pantomimes (a holiday tradition of taking familiar tales and having a good giggle with them). Then head to *One Man, Two Guvnors*, a charming chef's surprise of a comedy that tosses in music hall, vaudeville, slapstick, farce, Shakespearean clowns, lovers in disguise, and birds and blokes who fancy each other and somehow turns it all into a tasty dish. It's a diverting treat rather than a substantial meal, but you won't feel guilty about enjoying yourself.

James Corden (TV's *Gavin & Stacey*, *The History Boys*) holds court as Francis, a working stiff who soon finds himself in the employ of not one but two bosses. He's desperately hungry and tries to keep both of them happy until he can finally score some cash and get a proper meal. Dolly (Suzie Toase) is an eye-popping distraction as a curvy working girl he wouldn't mind escorting on a holiday, but first things first. Food!

Corden breaks the fourth wall, rolls on the floor, fights with himself, indulges in audience participation both real and imaginary, plays the xylophone and basically wins you over with uproarious charm. He's a full-sized comedian but it's hard to believe the pounds don't melt off him after such a strenuous evening of theater. Maybe after the show he heads right to a big meal in some sort of cruel contractual obligation? Whatever the case, he's the steam engine that keeps this show running.



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Read [my original review of the show in London here](#). Most of the cast is the same and if anything, they are better here. The piece itself -- an adaption by Richard Bean of Carlo Goldoni's *The Servant Of Two Masters* -- is a grab bag of pleasure, starting with the skiffle band that plays before the show and during intermission to the vaudeville turns and the shameless elderly waiter shtick of Tom Edden that could have kept him employed for decades back in the day of the variety circuit.

A second viewing reinforces my original impression that this is a pretty good play that depends a great deal on a great cast. Corden is a delight and Oliver Chris is hilarious as the upper crust Stanley Stubbers. I believe he has slowed his delivery ever so slightly to allow American audiences to parse his British-isms but it hasn't slowed his comic timing. I was a tad reserved about Daniel Rigby as the would-be actor Alan when I saw him in London. Oh, he was funny, but the part was a tad too broad for my tastes, even in this "anything goes" context. Either I was more prepared for him or he's subtly tweaked his work because here I found Rigby had humanized Alan just enough to keep his absurd posing rooted in reality. And that makes him all the funnier. Jemima Rooper gets the job done in a demanding part that must be vocally challenging. And a special nod to the member of the ensemble whose work I was able to focus on the second time I saw the show for obvious reasons. She gave a natural, unaffected and very convincing turn that never milked her situation for laughs, thus getting more of them. It's a nice bit of work and crucial to the high point of the show.

Indeed, in a show like this after doing it off and off for more than a year, the tendency would be to go broader and play for more laughs. Full credit to director Nicholas Hytner for keeping them tight and disciplined amongst the silly bits. Special nod to Cal McCrystal for his work on the slapstick, dubbed here the "physical comedy director." All the tech elements (the pitch perfect sets and costumes by Mark Thompson, the lighting by Mark Henderson and the challenging work by Paul Arditti of providing sound for a cast constantly on the go, a skiffle band positioned either on the side or moving to various parts of the stage, and numerous boinks and bonks to nail home the physical humor without drawing attention to itself.

Watching it in London and New York is a real treat since you can compare the two crowds. The UK audience loves this sort of comedy to its bone. They simply howled from beginning to end. However much the New York audience laughs (and they do, especially for the crowd participation moments), trust me, the London audience was louder by a factor of ten. There were patches where the New York crowd was properly amused but not uproarious. Toase's winning turn as Dolly is quite charming in particular, but she didn't get nearly the same reaction from the audience here that she deserved for her saucy asides. Certain jokes naturally had less of an impact -- namely a dig at Princess Margaret and repeated slugging of Australia -- but it all translates easily into a funny lark of an evening.

The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four-star scale)

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No Place To Go ** 1/2
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One Arm ***
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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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Fern Siegel: Stage Door: *One Man, Two Guvnors, End of the Rainbow*

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Tom Teicholz: Culture With a Side of Popcorn

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Michael Giltz: Theater: 'Clybourne Park' Moves to Broadway; Property Values Rise

The Pulitzer Prize-winning drama Clybourne Park has just moved to Broadway and its new neighbors are not happy about it. Can you blame them?



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