

## REVIEWS • Theatre • Dance

## Rum and Vodka

Reviewed by Michael Lozan

Presented by Erich Jungwirth and Richard Jordan in association with SOHO Think Tank at the Ohio Theatre, casting consultant J. Max Sullivan, 66 Wooster St., NYC, Oct. 7-Nov. 3.

The Irish playwright Conor McPherson is best known for "The Weir," which of course ran on Broadway after winning the Olivier Award in England. This striking early offering by McPherson—written when he was only 20 at University College, Dublin—is more proof of this writer's gift for long, brooding, quiet-by-compiling monologues.

As a matter of fact, "Rum and Vodka" is a more stirring and engaging evening of theatre than the rather elliptical "The Weir," if less original and poetic. It concerns a grim, young, working-class man who has been married to a woman with whom he has a less-than-vibrant relationship. Amid drink, two small children, as well as a job working on computers, this lost 24-year-old man is ready for disaster.

One day the disaster hits as he suddenly throws a computer out a window during a fit of pique. After the subsequent termination, he goes out on a drinking binge, during which he meets up with an attractive rich girl, who beds him dispassionately.

This may not sound like too much of a story, but McPherson tells it with just the right kind of teasing, rhythm, and mournfulness to make this a very real-seeming depiction of Ireland. Making it work all the more is the fact that this is not the apocryphal Ireland of Yeats, that land of rural woe, unsophisticated virgins, and famine. Happily, this is modern Ireland, a place where there is a mix of modern technology and rules amid ancient longings and preoccupations.

There was one actor on stage, Mark Alhadeff, an unremarkable looking American who should be doing major things if there is any justice in the entertainment world. Alhadeff inhabited this character so completely, under Samuel Bugegin's direction, that it really appeared there was a man in the room simply telling you a story. His Irish accent, as assisted by dialect coach Ann Klausch, was remarkably convincing for an American.

## Giszelle

Reviewed by Lisa Jo Sogolla

Presented by and at The Kitchen, 512 W. 19 St., NYC, Oct. 9, 11, 12.

It's usually the choreographer who deserves most of the creative credit for the making of an inspired dance piece. But in the case of "Giszelle"—an engrossing solo dance being given its American premiere at The Kitchen—the performer, Eszter Salamon, merits an equal share of the kudos. Though French choreographer Xavier Le Roy conceived the work, the choreography was collaboratively created by Le Roy and Salamon, and it is the performer's physical eloquence that lies at the heart of the dance's powerful allure. (Le Roy gives us a clue ahead of time that his work really belongs to the dancer on whom he created it; notice how he spells the title.)

To soaring strains from the familiar Adolphe Adam score, this "Giszelle" opens in a blatantly un-balletic fashion, with the stationary image of a woman dressed in jeans and a hot-pink

T-shirt casually lying on her back. Although she eventually rises and performs a ballet variation in silence, we quickly realize that this work is not a reinterpretation of the great Romantic ballet.

Instead, the piece evolves as a series of movement images—historical and contemporary, animistic and human—that reveal the inherent relationships between such seemingly dissimilar actions as an ape's lumbering, classical ballet, and Travolta's signature "Saturday Night Fever" stances. Salamon takes a few Michael Jackson moonwalk steps, shapes her body into Rodin's "The Thinker," then struts around the stage like a runway model. As the piece progresses, however, the vocabularies become less isolated. Classical arabesques appear in the middle of disco sequences. Gorilla postures creep into the sexy supermodel's stroll. An amalgamation of actions emerges that succeeds in breaking down our notions of movement hierarchies. Yet because Salamon's kinesthetic articulation is so clear, it never becomes a blur, but remains a sly montage of sublime quick-shots.



"Disguise" Divas: Andrew Pang (L.), Julio Agustin, and Jeffrey Drew.

Carol Rosegg



Stop, "Book" and Listen: Alan Campbell and Matthew Rauch in Lanford Wilson's play.

Rahav Segev/Photopass.com

creative people who are passionate about quality and justice against right-wingers whose primary concern is money and appearance. Guess who wins the moral victory?

With his usual incisive flair for natural-sounding dialogue and insight into character, Wilson examines the hypocrisies rampant in a church-dominated Missouri town. The death of the richest man in town becomes a "Murder She Wrote" scenario as the pious denizens ignore the ugly truth of greed and covetousness in their God-fearing midst. Not everyone is taken in. Ruth, the bookkeeper at the cheese factory, smells a rat and seeks to expose him. She's also playing the lead in the local hit-theatre production of Shaw's "Saint Joan." And the parallels between Joan of Arc's cause and Ruth's real-life crusade are too obvious.

Despite these flaws, "Book" holds your attention with a vice-like grip. The 12 characters all have fascinating quirks and individual ways of expressing themselves. With the aid of his longtime director, Marshall W. Mason, Wilson weaves a rich tapestry of interconnected lives. Too bad the conflicts and the conclusion are so predictable.

The actors bring shadings and depth to their characterizations. I particularly admired Miriam Shor's intense Ruth, Nancy Snyder's every-hair-in-place widow, Boris McGiver's jittery Earl, and Matthew Rauch as Ruth's husband, the manager of the cheese factory who can tear up over the beauties of a pungent provolone he's been developing. Few actors can get emotional over cheese and make it convincing, but Rauch pulls it off. The old design team from Wilson and Mason's Circle Rep days (John Lee Beatty on set, Laura Crow on costumes, and Dennis Parichy on lighting) creates a seemingly bright community with dark secrets just underneath the surface.

## Book of Days

Reviewed by David Sheward

Presented by Signature Theatre Company, casting by Jerry Beaver and Associates, Ltd., at the Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42 St., NYC, Nov. 3-Dec. 8.

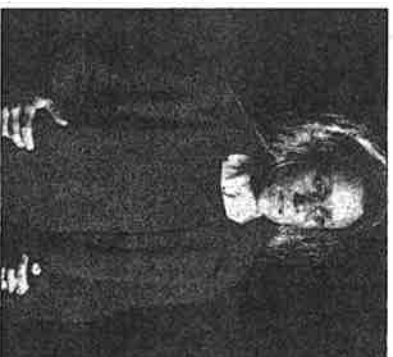
My new play by Lanford Wilson is cause for celebration. Wilson is one of our foremost dramatists and he has been too long absent from the New York stage. Unfortunately, "Book of Days," the second production in an all-Wilson season at Signature Theatre, is brilliantly structured, but the underlying theme is neither new nor challenging. Basically, he pits

## Far Away

Reviewed by Victor Gluck

Presented by and at New York Theatre Workshop in association with the Royal Court Theatre, the Ambassador Theatre Group, and Old Vic Productions, casting by Jack Doulin, 79 E. Fourth St., NYC, Nov. 11-Dec. 22.

Caryl Churchill's "Far Away" fits into a body of work by such British political playwrights as David Hare, Arnold Wesker, Howard Brenton, and Harold Pinter (particularly his "Mountain Language"). The play can be seen as a cautionary tale, a parable of previous political events, or a symbolic version of things going on right now in the far corners of our planet. Stephen Daldry, who directed the original Royal Court Theatre production, has staged this short but powerfully provocative drama with a sure



Nightmare Alley: Frances McDormand faces a scary future in Caryl Churchill's political fantasy.

hand and a crisp style.

The play begins as a child's nightmare that turns out to be real, rather than imagined. Joan, a child, visiting her Aunt Harper in the country, has looked out her window and seen blood, a truck, and people being dragged to the barn. Years later, we

drag as Lady Linda, effortlessly delivering one of the best performances of the evening. Julio Agustin is Fidelito, a Cuban drag queen with a wide-eyed look reminiscent of Lucille Ball, who spices up the show with her trembling lips and sexy persona. And Andrew Pang is the uncompromising and flamboyant Lily Chow Mein in a short-lived star turn.

The show begins when the club manager (Jacob Hartran) threatens to boot Lady Linda and her cast out if she does not present five drag queens on stage as promised. There is reason to worry over finding the performers in time to go on with the show. As a last resort, the straight stage manager, Sam (James Grimaldi), offers to perform in drag if Lily Chow does not arrive in time.

Another backstage story centers on Fidelito and her man, Santiago, played lecherously with a humorous macho

## Blessing in Disguise

Reviewed by Jeanette Toomer

Presented by Gary Camata and Robert DeBenedictis, casting by Stephanie Klapper, at the Times Square Theater, 646 Eighth Ave., NYC. Opened Oct. 19 for an open run.

A drag show within a show is the premise for "Blessing in Disguise," a musical comedy written and directed by Larry Pellegrini. While the music and clever lyrics keep one hoping for something more intelligent, the comedy crashes and burns with stereotypical characterizations and predictable dialogue.

Yet three actors come to the rescue. Patrick Quinn displays a dry wit in

flair by Allen Hidalgo. He flouts his infidelity among the ladies. Sam comes to Fidelito's defense when Santiago brazenly invades the dressing room threatening sexual assault.

There is shameless ethnic stereotyping, that in many instances drags down the show, involving George "The Big G," a black drag queen (Ken Prymus); Fidelito; and a boozing white Southern "belle" (Jeffrey Drew). Still, their solo performances in "My Papi" and "Live Fast, Die Young" are enjoyable but poignant revealing sad truths.

Creative costuming by Juan de Armas demonstrates exquisite flair for colors and showbiz panache. Set designer Michael Anania makes ingenious use of the small stage.

For more reviews, visit the Back Stage website at [www.backstage.com](http://www.backstage.com).