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Dames and Ripcord Provide Simple Pleasures

David Sheward · Thursday, October 29th, 2015

A show doesn't have to be a masterpiece to provide an enjoyable evening of theater. Case in point: two recent openings may not win a shelf full of Tonys or a Pulitzer Prize, but they kept me entertained for their respective two hours' traffic. Both *Dames at Sea* on Broadway at the Helen Hayes and *Ripcord* from Manhattan Theatre Club at its Off-Broadway berth at City Center employ familiar tropes. In the case of *Dames*, the director and cast execute cinema cliches with infectious charm and in *Ripcord* playwright David Lindsay-Abaire expands on the familiar mismatched-roommates theme.

Danny Gardner, Mara Davi, John Bolton, Eloise Kropp, Cary Tedder, and Lesli Margherita in *Dames at Sea*.
Credit: Jeremy Daniel

Dames is an affectionate spoof of 1930s movie musicals first presented Off-Off-Broadway at Caffe Cino in 1966 as a one-act with a then-unknown Bernadette Peters. The clever cameo was lengthened, knocked an Off from its credentials when it moved to the Theatre de Lys (now the Lucille Lortel) two years later and made a star out of Peters. The piece is basically an extended sketch like the ones they did on *The Carol Burnett Show*, sending up every plotline in the book including the unknown kid going on for the star, the gutsy troupe surmounting incredible odds to put on a show, and the innocent ingenue winning the hero from the scheming leading lady. The fizzy songs by composer Jim Wise and lyricists George Haimsohn and Robin Miller offer just as many pastiche references as the book. Gershwin, Porter, Berlin, Warren, and the team of Desylva, Brown, and Henderson all get the tribute treatment.

It's as light as a soap bubble and just as lasting, sure to burst as soon as you hit the pavement outside the Helen Hayes. But while the hard-working cast keeps the bubble afloat, *Dames* is a delight. Director-choreographer Randy Skinner served as Gower Champion's assistant on *42nd Street* and staged the 2001 revival. He supplies the same kind of polished production values and tip-top taps for this miniature from the same template.

The six-member company captures the archetypes they portray with precision and humor. Eloise Kropp's plucky Ruby, Cary Tedder's earnest Dick, Danny Gardner's goofy Lucky, and Mara Davi's wisecracking Joan display amazing dance and comedic skills. John Bolton brilliantly doubles as the slave-driving director and the pompous ship's captain. But they are all second bananas to Lesli Margherita's hilarious Mona Kent, the diva to end all divas. Margherita, the brainless ballroom-dancing mother from *Matilda*, can get a laugh just by walking across the stage

with a ladder (the gag is Mona is off to fix her misspelled name on the marquee.) The performer perfectly captures the narcissistic excesses of this spoiled star, covering up her lower-class roots with a ridiculous upper-crust accent. She opens the show with a boffo “Wall Street” (a knock-off of “We’re in the Money”), sends up every torch song ever written in “That Mister Man of Mine,” and perfectly pairs with Bolton on a witty satire of Porter’s “Begin the Beguine.” A dynamite dame in a dazzling *Dames*.

Holland Taylor and Marylouise Burke in *Ripcord*.
Credit: Joan Marcus

Just as *Dames* sounds like a rerun of Carol Burnett, *Ripcord* has the ring of an old *Golden Girls* segment. Grouchy Abby and good-natured Marilyn share a room in an assisted living facility. The outgoing Marilyn is as pleased as punch with the arrangement, but ill-tempered Abby wants to be alone. They bet on who can make the other break her respective facade first with Marilyn vacating or winning the bed by the window as the stakes. It sounds like sitcom fodder. But, as he did with his *Fuddy Meers, Good People, Rabbit Hole,* and *Kimberly Akimbo*, author David Lindsay-Abaire combines comedy with pathos for realistic depiction of life where the line between hilarity and heartache blurs.

Marilyn and her loving family maintain their quirky sense of humor even after we learn dark secrets of their shared lives. Abby is not just a comically nasty crone, but a deeply wounded woman who has come by her forbidding nature thanks to a series of devastating tragedies. Director David Hyde-Pierce and the cast led by a razor-sharp Holland Taylor as Abby and sweet-but-tough Marylouise Burke as Marilyn tread a fine line between laughter and tears, achieving the perfect balance between the two. Slapstick is cheek by jowl with sorrow and it works.

Dames at Sea: Opened Oct. 22 for an open run. Helen Hayes Theatre, 240 W. 44th St., NYC. Tue.—Thu., 7 p.m.; Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours, ten mins. including one intermission; $67.50-$154.50; (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

Ripcord: Oct. 20—Dec. 6. Manhattan Theatre Club at City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Tue.—Wed., 7 p.m.; Thu.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 2 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m. Running time: two hours including intermission; $90; (212) 581-1212 or www.nycitycenter.org.

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