

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Laughter and Tears at the Odyssey

Sylvie · Thursday, April 30th, 2015

It's not often that you get to see two openings in one afternoon, even at Los Angeles' Odyssey Theatres, plural, because of its several stages. And while the two productions are connected only by their destination, it was interesting to catch a world premiere comedy (John Bunzel's *63 Trillion*) and a West Coast premiere drama (Dominique Morisseau's *Sunset Baby*) in the single space of five and a half hours. Both had their flaws, but both also had quite a lot to recommend them.

The comedy first. *63 Trillion*, a guest production, is about the stock market world and the (mostly) men who populate it. Bunzel, who has been a playwright, screenwriter and film producer, is currently also a "wealth manager," as financial advisors like to call themselves these days. (The implication is that these "managers" will make you "wealth"-ier, even as they take great care to warn you there are "no guarantees").

Well, duh. But it does take one to know one, and this satirical spoof deals with precisely *that* aspect of the market: the inner dysfunction — the crashes, the rivalries, disarray, false promises, ruthlessness and other unspeakables.

Yup. Nothing there but 63 trillion laughs, right? In fact, there are several dozen, worked up and delivered by one of wealth management's own who knows all the angles and does not hesitate to share. Remember David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*, about that other laugh riot, the real estate market? *63 Trillion* is its stock market pendant. (What's next? Used car salesmen? You think?)

A production of The New American Theatre and Mud Bay Productions, *63 Trillion* offers us the awesome spectacle of a 3,000-point debacle in the stock market within roughly 24 hours and lets us watch it play out without making us feel a moment of pain.

These half-dozen executive vice presidents (aren't they all?) are in it for the kill (read that as in killing each other as well as you). They smack their lips at the hunt for the "cut" and have no trouble switching loyalties more often than their undershorts if it'll improve their bottom lines.

Otherwise, this fast-paced comedy — and yes, it *is* funny — will leave you with that warm and fuzzy feeling that it's their money, not yours, that is vanishing into thin air at a truly dizzying clip.



l-r, Jack Stehlin and Ken Lerner in *63 Trillion*.

This is light and tasty fare, delivered by a strong ensemble cast, with particularly effective

performances by Ken Lerner (*love* his S.Z. Sakkal jellyjowls), Jeffrey Jones, Jordan Lund, and Megan Gallagher as Nancy “from legal.”

While a reference is made in the piece about equality for women in this male-dominated world, it is interesting to note that the only woman in the cast is stuck with the play’s major flaw: the moment when she’s required to throw up. Throwing up is the cheapest laugh to go after, and it’s never worth the pay-off. (Remember Yasmina Reza’s *God of Carnage*? It wasn’t worth it there either.) Let’s leave that nonsense to the movies that lately seem to really, really favor it.

Otherwise, this comedy relies on the kind of people you love to hate and dialogue you hate to love. It is directed with alacrity by Steve Zuckerman, at a pace that could be even swifter — and an intermission that should be dumped.

This is your quintessential 90-minute-with-no-intermission comedy. You don’t want to interrupt the momentum of this market’s rush to the bottom. And while the *real-world* market’s recent gains make these stage megalosses easier to laugh at, everyone remembers days when the opposite has been true. So go ahead, laugh, clown, laugh, because backatya is only a matter time...



Chris Gardner and Nadege August in *Sunset Baby*.

Around the corner from these stock market gangsters, Morisseau’s *Sunset Baby* deals more seriously with three people trapped in their own private catastrophes. This is an Odyssey production of a beautiful play that is somewhat overwritten (it takes a little too long to get started and betrays some didacticism in doing so), but that evolves into something deeper and very moving. It is the story of a tough-as-nails hooker and drug-dealer named Nina (a sizzling Nadège August) who worships her celebrated late mother, despises her activist-excon father Kenyatta (Vincent J. Isaac), and puts up with her “man,” Damon (Chris Gardner), a small-time, well-meaning drug-dealer who is smitten, but will never catch up to Nina’s intellect.

Damon is devoted; he would like nothing better than to run off to some other country and start a new life with Nina, something she too professes to want and something they are planning together. Or are they? The past is a nagging beast. It doesn’t let go, and when Nina’s father attempts to re-enter her life, it stirs up a hornets’ nest of bites and stings for everyone.



Chris Gardner and Nadege August in *Sunset Baby*

Dominique Morisseau (such a beautiful name) is not creating mere stereotypes, although the production, directed by Jeffrey Hayden, sometimes settles for that. As this playwright carefully and repeatedly tells us, it’s... complicated. Yes, this is a story about the aftermath of another demoralizing case of failed black activism from the 1970s and 80s, when many dreams were shattered. But its undercurrents are much more subtle than its surfaces. It is first and foremost a play about family unintended consequences — the broken relationships and lacerations that won’t scar. To reveal the secrets in everyone’s baggage takes time and a special kind of hard-edged delicacy, although, in what may seem like a contradiction, the play could, and probably should be shortened, especially the early more expository part.

What distinguishes it is the raw and uncompromising quality of Morisseau’s writing. Call it perilously close to a kind of poetic iconoclasm, sometimes a little too studied. Above all, though, it

demands a high level of acting, something the production is not always able to deliver.

The father, Kenyatta, is key — a complex and demanding character filled with regret, but amazingly still strong in his loneliness and sorrow. In a piece with just three players, how he comes across affects everything else. Isaac is not the right actor for the part, which requires great physical stature, along with a stew of presence, power, pain, wisdom, patience, toughness and sadness.

Damon is the least developed of the three, but Gardner fleshes him out as well as he can with an energetic drive. And he has the right partner in August, who is a striking, moody Nina (named by her parents after Nina Simone, a singer they both loved). She is the active center of this show, possessing the looks and sudden moves, but also the sensitivity and intelligence for a role almost as complicated and even more emotionally charged than that of her father.

The hurdles do get in the way, but the quality of the writing shines through in a play that ultimately has a tender heart. It is a deceptively simple tale with entirely believable — and extensive — ramifications. Let's hope Los Angeles gets to see more of Morisseau's writing. She's a talent who deserves everyone's attention.



Chris Gardner and Nadege August in *Sunset Baby*

Top image: l-r, Jordan Lund, Megan Gallagher, Noah James, Ken Lerner, Jack Stehlin, and Jeffrey Jones in 63 Trillion

63 Trillion photos by Ed Krieger.

Sunset Baby photos by Enci Box.

WHAT: *63 Trillion*

WHEN: Fridays-Saturdays, 8pm; 2pm Sunday, June 7 only, 2pm. Ends June 7.

WHERE: A guest production at the Odyssey Theatre, 2055 So. Sepulveda Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90025.

HOW: Tickets, \$30-\$34.99 at the theatre box office or 310-477-2055 or online at www.newamericantheatre.com/tickets.html.

WHAT: *Sunset Baby*

WHEN: Varied schedule, through June 7. Check days & times at (310) 477-2055 ext. 2 or online at www.OdysseyTheatre.com.

WHERE: Odyssey Theatre 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd. Los Angeles CA 90025.

HOW: Tickets: Wednesdays-Fridays, \$30; Saturdays-Sundays, \$34.99; Pay-What-You-Can (minimum \$10) on Wed, May 6 & Wed, May 27.

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