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Nathan Lane Knocks It Outta the Park in The Front Page

David Sheward · Thursday, October 27th, 2016

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If you think of the new revival of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *The Front Page* as an all-star baseball game, then Nathan Lane is the closing relief pitcher, hurling perfect comic strikes with every throw. He doesn't come on until the last few innings and his team has been flagging with a few walks but not many solid base hits. Director Jack O'Brien has not given them the proper pacing for this frantic 1928 farce of foul-mouthed scandal-sheet scribblers cracking wise and chasing scoops in corrupt Chicago. This comes as a surprise since O'Brien is such an adept hand at large-scale ensemble pieces such as the musical *Hairspray*, the conflation of two *Henry IV* plays, the three-evening *Coast of Utopia*, and a London stage adaptation of *His Girl Friday*, the 1940 movie version of *Front Page* which transformed the original into a romantic comedy by switching the lead character's gender to female.

Nathan Lane and John Goodman in *The Front Page*
Credit: Julieta Cervantes

That central relationship is between ace reporter Hildy Johnson (John Slattery of *Mad Men* fame) and his ruthless "anything-for-a-story" editor Walter Burns. Just as Johnson is about to chuck his ink-stained-wretch status for a well-scrubbed fiancee (the charming Halley Feiffer) and a cushy New York job in advertising, Burns pulls him back for the biggest byline ever, covering the escape of unlikely convicted cop killer Earl Williams (rabbit-like John Magaro).

Hecht and MacArthur based this knockabout romp on their own raw experiences as newspapermen with two dozen denizens of the sleazy side of the fourth estate and various hangers-on trouncing through the courthouse press room (appropriately squalid set by Douglas Schmidt). Burns enters late in the action and is meant to be a capper to the mad media circus. But, in the current staging, the preceding one hour and 45 minutes is only intermittently rollicking and Lane delivers a much needed jolt with his amazing timing, phrasing, and reactions. (Watch his body slump as he attempts to move a huge roller-top desk or his face contort into a galaxy of horrified disgust at a hack writer's poetic drivel.)

Christopher McDonald, John Goodman, Dylan Baker, and Clarke Thorell in *The Front Page*
Credit: Julieta Cervantes

As Hildy, a game John Slattery anchors the action for much of the show and valiantly attempts to

keep up with Lane, but pales once his co-star steps onto the field. The remainder of the large company is perfectly acceptable but rarely reaches Lane's Olympic level antics. Those who come closest are Dann Florek as a pompous, platitude-spouting mayor, Micah Stock as a dim-bulb cop on a psychology kick, and Jefferson Mays as that would-be rhymester, a fussy proto-Felix Ungar, prissily spraying disinfectant. Sherie Rene Scott achieves some genuine pathos as the proverbial hooker with a heart of gold and Robert Morse earns guffaws in the cameo role of a nebbishy messenger. Lewis J. Stadlen and Dylan Baker register the strongest among the crowd of Hildy's fellow newshounds. John Goodman goes for Foghorn Leghorn cartoonishness as a goofy, good-ole boy sheriff. They're a strong team, but Lane is unquestionably a star among stars.

Oct. 20—Jan. 29. Broadhurst Theatre, 235 W. 44th St., NYC. Tue, Thu, 7 pm; Wed, Fri—Sat, 8 pm; Wed, Sat, 2 pm; Sun, 3 pm. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including two intermissions. $67—$157. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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