Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Quack Like a Doc & Laugh Out Loud

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 31st, 2018

How many times have you stood in front of a television set and wondered about that strapping, healthy looking doctor on the screen, grinning from ear to ear, as he dispensed advice and meds like a gum ball machine gone rogue?

No need to answer that. Playwright Eliza Clark has done it for us. In *Quack*, a comedy she developed with the Center Theatre Group L.A.'s Writers' Workshop that is having its world premiere at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, the satire is benign but it knows how to throw a sting when needed.

Clark is no rookie. This play may be new, but she has written others, some published, some commissioned by such major companies as South Coast Rep, several produced in New York and elsewhere. In addition, she's a writer and executive producer for TNT's *Animal Kingdom*. But she's new to me (and maybe to you too) and nothing had quite prepared me for the hilarity of *Quack* or its serene ability to skewer so many targets at one shot.

Jackie Chung & Dan Bucatinsky in *Quack* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

Along with eviscerating the trivial nature of TV's medical peddling, with its ratings-dependent life span, *Quack* takes on the high stakes and bad behavior of the many individuals involved. It also casts a withering look at the unwitting roles we, the people, play, plus media's irresponsibility, and the sexism and racism — overt or undercover — implicated in the game.

Dr. Irving Baer (Dan Bucatinsky), an entrenched TV medic megastar, is unexpectedly attacked in the media over conflicted ethics as perceived by an obscure African American reporter named River Thumbolt (Shoniqua Shandai). To Dr. Baer's consternation, it brings his 20-year TV career to an abrupt end. For added humiliation, Nurse Kelly (Jackie Chung), a timid colleague who always revered Baer as her mentor, is elected to — gulp — replace him on the air.

Dan Bucatinsky & Jessalyn Gilsig in *Quack* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City.

Kelly rises eloquently to the occasion, while Baer's life and marriage founder. So does the business run by Baer's wife Meredith (Jessalyn Gilsig), a "diet empire" that's an offshoot of the doctor's success. When Baer decides to confront his attacker, he finds her a worthier opponent than he knew. By the time Brock Silver (Nicholas D'Agosto), a self-appointed defender of macho males,

steps in to offer Baer support, guidance and enlightenment about the role reversal that he sees as destroying America's men, this crackerjack comedy is off and running.

l-r, Dan Bucatinsky & Nicholas D'Agosto in *Quack* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

Funny? In Clark's hands, very. She takes no prisoners. Her characters are all flawed and subversive — ambidextrously good and bad in almost equal measure, so that the bar is high but the battlefield level, and the surprises just keep coming.

The production has been beautifully cast and Neel Keller's direction moves things along at just the right clip — swift in its comic exchanges, more contemplative when it matters. Bucatinsky is the perfect spoiled brat — frenetic and neurotic in the central role of a self-inflated sad sack, blithely unaware of his limitations. His perfect foil is his angry wife, portrayed by Gilsig as the Wicked Witch on stiletto heels, who reveals a bewildering moral side when she decides to walk out on him.

Chung has the hardest job, balancing the wimp she appears to be with the more assertive star she becomes, a woman who does not forget her principles when push comes to shove. The biggest surprise is Shandai's River, least defined of all the characters, but clever and enigmatic until her life in the fast line goes from vivid to vicious, fully paying her back, blow for blow.

l-r, Shoniqua Shandai & Jackie Chung in *Quack* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

Ultimately the comedy's brilliance lies in the unsparing battle of words and character, filled with insight into the broader selfishness of the society that breeds such circumstances and such people.

It's not a pretty picture and Clark makes no attempt to soften it. And yet. There is something so bemused and forgiving in both the clarity and charity of her vision that the laughter it provokes is cleansing and oddly immunizing. We leave the theatre instructed, lighthearted and uplifted.

Who'd-a thought it?

Top image: l-r, Dan Bucatinsky, Shoniqua Shandai & Jessalyn Gilsig in Quack *at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City.*

Photos by Craig Schwartz

WHAT: *Quack*

WHERE: Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd., Culver City, CA 90232.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Ends Nov 18.

HOW: Tickets, $25-$72 (subject to change), available at (213) 628-2772, or online at CenterTheatreGroup.org, in person at the Center Theatre Group Box Office (at the Ahmanson Theatre, Music Center in Downtown Los Angeles) or at the Kirk Douglas Theatre Box Office two hours prior to performances. Groups: (213) 972-7231. Deaf community: Info & charge at

CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

PARKING: Free three-hour covered parking at City Hall, with validation (available in the Kirk Douglas lobby).

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