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Review: It's Only A Play

David Sheward · Wednesday, October 22nd, 2014

Mixed Results From All-Star Cast of *It's Only A Play*

Nathan Lane is a miracle worker. What other Broadway star—and he is one of the few whose name alone sells tickets—could breathe comic oxygen into a dated script and overcome a comatose co-star? Those two Herculean feats are accomplished by the amazing Lane in the revival of *It's Only a Play*, Terrence McNally's insider comedy about the opening night of a Main Stem flop. The castmate that Lane carries is Matthew Broderick, his compatriot from *The Producers* and *The Odd Couple*. The Lane-Broderick combination, along with four other big film and TV headliners, has cemented the production's status as a sold-out, limited-run hit before the reviews even came out. While Lane is energetic and clockwork-precise in his portrayal of a frustrated sitcom actor, Broderick is stiff, awkward and tired as his best friend, a once promising playwright who looks every minute of the actor's 52 years.

Rupert Grint, Megan Mullally, Matthew Broderick, Nathan Lane, and Stockard Channing. Photo: Joan Marcus.

In addition, too many of McNally's gags about the state of the New York stage have passed their sell-by date. *Play* first appeared Off-Broadway in productions in 1982 (at Manhattan Punch Line) and 1986 (Manhattan Theatre Club) and before that it closed out of town in Philadelphia under the title *Broadway, Broadway* in 1977. I saw the Philadelphia and MTC productions, and the current incarnation, which features several updates, revisions and edits (a female cab driver delivering the much-awaited *NY Times* review has been dropped), is the least of those three. Perhaps it's because the characters are in a sort of weird time warp co-existing in the 1980s and 2014. Many of the conditions the characters complain about no longer exist or are no longer funny. Freeloading union musicians don't play poker backstage anymore and gay actors are not constrained to stay in the closet. The chief theatre critic of the *Times* is not as powerful as the position once was and the current office-holder is not British. Internet forums are called chat boards now, not chat rooms, and David Mamet is not the only author who uses foul language.

Yet despite the tired quips, director Jack O'Brien and the brilliant Lane keep the audience howling. The actor lands every punchline at exactly the right moment, guaranteeing maximum guffaws. He accurately skewers almost every big name on Broadway—including his own. While Lane is on stage the fun never stops and O'Brien keeps the pacing at a rapid clip. This is, until Broderick shows up and slows everything down. Totally lacking in vitally, the former Ferris Bueller seems to be phoning his performance in….from a hospital bed.

The remainder of the cast delivers mixed results. As the neophyte producer, Megan Mullalley offers a stylish, clenched-jaw variation on her bitchy, ditzy Karen Walker from *Will and Grace*. Despite the use of a cane due to a knee injury, Stockard Channing is firing on all cylinders as a pill-popping, coke-snorting diva. Rupert Grint is effectively gruff as a nasty British director, the polar opposite of his nebbishy Ron Weasley persona from the Harry Potter films (By the way, the joke involving Grint and the cloak of invisibility falls flat). Grint needs to work on his vocal projection; too much of his dialogue was unintelligible. F. Murray Abraham is miscast, but game as a snide theater critic. Newcomer Micah Stock is drolly deadpan as a fresh-off-the-bus coatcheck boy.

Scott Pask's elegant Upper East Side set and Ann Roth's fashionable tuxes and frocks provide glamorous distractions to look at when even the magnificent Nathan Lane can't sustain the recycled jokes and celebrity name-dropping.

It's Only A Play runs now—Jan. 4, 2015. Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre, 236 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri., Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 35 mins. including intermission. $72-$147. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

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