

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

W-A-A-Y, WAY Off the King's Road

Sylvie · Monday, June 29th, 2015

In his early short play, *The Real Inspector Hound*, Tom Stoppard satirized the role of the critic. It was self-satire since Stoppard, in his younger life, was employed briefly as a theatre critic, a profession he found confusing. He loves to tell how he never quite knew where the boundaries were, and how to handle reviewing friends or writing bad reviews.

No one likes writing bad reviews because it is equally true that no one sets out to deliberately mount a bad production. It does happen, however, and part of the critic's responsibility is to call it as she (or he) sees it. So the job is twofold: to serve the art and to serve the public. That's the broad definition.

The assumption this critic must make is that Neil Koenigsberg's *Off the King's Road*, now running as a guest production at The Odyssey Theatre, was well-intentioned when it started out. Unfortunately, the end results are dismal.

Let's start with the play which is not a play at all, since it appears to have no center, conflict or lift, but is more like a series of vignettes. That might have worked, except that these are too long, too slow and far too uninvolved.

We are basically watching Matt Brown (Tom Bower), a recently widowed American of a certain age, arrive at a small English hotel for a week of London R&R. This is a city that holds happy memories of times he shared there with his late wife. And that is more or less where the good stuff ends.



I-r, Thaddeus Shafer & Tom Bower in *Off the King's Road* at The Odyssey Theatre.

On his therapist Dr. Yablonsky's advice (a small, underwritten role nicely played for humor by Thaddeus Shafer), Matt has ordered a blackboard brought to his room, on which he's supposed to write down all the wonderful things he's going to see and do in wonderful London. (That blackboard turns out to be a really awkward and unwieldy item that barely fits, when something smaller would easily have sufficed.)

After writing everything down as he was told, it seems all Matt really wants to do in London is indulge his sexual fantasies — first with an inflatable doll purchased at a Hustler store, and then with a live Croatian prostitute, the sexy Sheena McDougall (played by the sexy Maria Zyrianova).

The other characters we meet are the gay hotel clerk Freddie (Michael Uribes), a rather boring if well-meaning chatty fellow — and the recently widowed, cat-loving Ellen Mellman (a game Casey Kramer), the stereotypical English fussbudget and hotel resident, who talks a blue streak, meddles and lives in perpetual search of her vanishing cat.



Maria Zyrianova and Tom Bower in *Off the King's Road* at The Odyssey Theatre.

In different hands, those ingredients might have delivered a modest comedy, but the pace here is so sluggish, the action so flat and the dialogue so devoid of sparkle or character that it is impossible to sustain any level of interest. The revelation at play's end that Matt has done something for which he feels guilty leaves us cold, because it is largely a manufactured guilt — and a manufactured ending. This so-called play does not have an authentic bone in its body.

When, in the final scene, Matt decides to invite Ellen Mellman to dinner and to watch some Billy Wilder movies, you'd think we'd finally see some joy. But no. Matt suffers a panic attack and an indeterminate injury to his knee that has him dragging a leg out the door as Ellen Mellman fusses just to keep him upright and keep him moving forward.



Tom Bower and Casey Kramer in *Off the King's Road*.

Some romance. It is an image emblematic of the entire flawed experience: two woefully unsuited people in for a wretched evening of incompatibility.

The sets by Joel Daavid are cramped and oddly configured. Lighting and costumes will do, but whatever made director Amy Madigan and NKBL Productions see more in this property than actually exists remains a total mystery.

Top image: l-r, Casey Kramer, Tom Bower & Michael Uribes in Off the King' Road at The Odyssey

All photos by Ed Krieger.

WHAT: *Off The King's Road*

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

WHEN: Fridays, 8pm, July 3, 24, 31; Saturdays, 8pm, July 4, 11, 18, 24 & August 1; Sundays, 2pm, July 5, 12, 19, 26 & August 2. Ends August 2.

HOW: Tickets Fridays & Sundays \$25, Saturdays \$30, available at www.plays411.com/kingsroad or 323.960.7712.

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