



GIVING THEIR ALL IN 'DEAD' PLAY: (left to right) Katie Holmes & Josh Hamilton in *Dead Accounts*.
Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

Dead Accounts

not Rebeck's best

Ms. Holmes & Mr. Butz shine in flawed family tale

DEAD ACCOUNTS

Written by Theresa Rebeck

Directed by Jack O'Brien

Music Box Theatre

239 West 45th Street

(212-719-6200), www.DeadAccountsOnBroadway.com

By David NouNou

Theresa Rebeck is a prolific playwright, but also an inconsistent one. You may recall *Mauritius* (loved it), *Seminar* (liked it), *The Water's Edge* (indifferent to it), and now *Dead Accounts* (hated it). The one thing these shows have in common is that they all have five characters in them. I wonder why it is always five and not four or six? Does the number five have a mystical power over her, or is it just a lucky number for her?

When the lights come up, we learn it is midnight and Jack (the ever-so-reliable Norbert Leo Butz), in a one-sided, hyper-kinetic conversation with his sister, Lorna (Katie Holmes), is extolling the virtues of Graeter's ice cream, a brand based in Cincinnati, Ohio. He has come back to be in the warm embrace of his family. He informs us of his discontent with New York and its cold people, and what a fool he was to leave Cincinnati. Naturally, Lorna is happy to have him back to relieve her tedium of having to look after their elderly parents. Her unseen father is on his deathbed from the pain of kidney stones. Her mother, Barbara (Jenna

father is on his deathbed from the pain of kidney stones. Her mother, Barbara (Jayne Houdyshell), is a Catholic religious zealot. Lorna is suspicious of Jack's motives for returning home so suddenly. In the process, he has left his wife, Jenny (Judy Greer), without informing her of his departure. The fifth character here is Phil (Josh Hamilton), the boy who has pined for Lorna since high school

Upon the ending of Act I (no spoiler alert), Jenny enters to inform everyone that Jack has embezzled \$27 million from the bank for which he worked. Jack does not see it that way; he feels the money belonged to dead people. In his mind, the money does not really belong to anyone, so no real crime was committed. The real crime that is committed in *Dead Accounts* is the fact that the storyline is so flimsy and forgettable that it is not worthy of Ms. Rebeck's talents. Somehow, an unseen father dying from the pain of kidney stones and a son embezzling \$27 million from dead accounts are not the perfect combination for a comedy. However, my judgment may be a tad cloudy on this subject, considering I was on Percocet when I was passing a kidney stone myself a few years back, and I may have been in a state of delirium from the excruciating pain I was having and from all the painkillers I took. I can assure you, it was no laughing matter.

The recipient of two Best Actor in a Musical Tony Awards, one for his hyper-kinetic role in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* and the other for *Catch Me If You Can*, Norbert Leo Butz has become the ruling monarch of this genre. It is a marvel to watch him inject life into a role that lacks depth and character. Kudos go out to Mr. Butz for consistent professionalism, and belief in his roles.

Katie Holmes is much more comfortable on stage since her 2008 debut in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*. She has the stage presence but nothing meaningful here in which to be present. Jayne Houdyshell, always centered and a delight to watch, in this instance is more of a loopy caricature mom with religious beliefs. Judy Greer has a couple of good scenes to make her presence felt, and Josh Hamilton as the pining loyal boyfriend does his best in an otherwise thankless role.

As if there weren't enough problems with the play, Jack O'Brien's directorial choices further complicate the proceedings and ultimately make less sense, especially when the show transitions from scene to scene by bringing in new characters, having them move around the stage doing clean-up chores, then going into blackouts, while ominous music is piped in and then the stage suddenly lights up for the next scene. Whatever happened to the good old-fashioned way of having your characters just appear in the next scene?

Ms. Rebeck has a genuine talent for writing plays, and has penned some interesting characters

and clever plot twists in the past. In the future, she really must strive less on being prolific and focus more on being proficient.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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