



LAUGHTER ON THE MENU: (left to right) Denis O'Hare, Brendan Fraser, Jennifer Coolidge in the excellent new Broadway comedy, *Elling*.
Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

**Stellar acting, lovable characters make
Elling an insanely funny gem**

Elling

New English adaptation by Simon Bent

Based on the novels of Ingvar Ambjornsen

Directed by Doug Hughes

Through March 20, 2011

Ethel Barrymore Theatre

243 West 47th Street

(212-239-6200), www.EllingOnBroadway.com

By David NouNou

Original comedies are becoming almost extinct on Broadway. Since one can glean humor from the most serious of dramas, comedy can mostly be found on sitcoms or stand-up routines. However, I'm pleased to report that comedy is alive and making a refreshing comeback with the arrival of *Elling*. Based on the 2002 Oscar-nominated Norwegian movie for Best Foreign Film, *Elling* (a recent hit in London) is a thoroughly delightful comedy from start to finish. Since Neil Simon is no longer writing new comedies, and Sir Alan Ayckbourn is primarily writing new material for the British stage, there has been a great shortage of feel-good, funny plays on this side of the Atlantic. At last, there is an original comedy gracing Broadway. What better time to rejoice in merriment than now at *Elling*, especially during the holiday season?

Originally adapted for film and stage by Axel Hellstenius and Petter Naess and given a new adaptation by Simon Bent, *Elling* brings together two misfits and mismatched characters and helps them form a lasting bond and friendship. Although they may be compared to Lenny and George in size and brain capacity in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* or Oscar and Felix of *The Odd Couple* duo, due to their slovenly and finicky mannerisms, the comparisons end there. Kjell Bjarne (Brendan Fraser) and Elling (Denis O'Hare) are brought together as roommates in a mental institution in Oslo. Kjell Bjarne is a lonely, lovable bearish oaf, and Elling is a persnickety momma's boy who still believes in his mother's virtues, although she has been dead for two years. Elling writes poetry and is all alone in the world. After two years of living together in the same room at the institution, the two men now must leave and start a new life together on the outside, and learn to function in the real world. They are given an apartment funded by the government, which they have to share, and a chain-smoking social worker, Frank Asli (Jeremy Shamos), to oversee their progress. Although one wouldn't want either one of them as a roommate, one cannot help but love these two people struggling to make a life for themselves. What may seem like normal everyday chores for us, be it going to the supermarket to buy food, talking to another person, or answering the phone—with these two, trying to figure such mundane things out is outlandish and hysterically funny.

Brendan Fraser is a movie actor making his Broadway debut in *Elling*. Although he doesn't have a commanding stage presence or technique, he abounds in sincerity, charisma and presence. He gives his simple oafish character some dimension, but it is singular. This is in large part due to the writing. His development process isn't as pronounced as Denis O'Hare's *Elling*. Mr. O'Hare is a stage veteran and a consummate thespian. He knows how to milk a line for every nuance it possesses. His character has much more of an altering life change and is nothing short of superb. He even fills in the gaps between his and Mr. Fraser's scenes together. It is truly a joy seeing them complement and enhance each other's performances.

Credit must also be given to the fabulous Jennifer Coolidge. She must have a copyright to the art of the deadpan. She is hilarious whether playing the upstairs pregnant neighbor who has taken a liking to Kjell Bjarne, a ditzy waitress, or an off-the-wall lady poet. Richard Easton as a poet who has lost his muse and now befriends *Elling*, and Jeremy Shamos as the overseer of the misfits, are both just right in their parts. They bring humor and sincerity to their scenes. Doug Hughes keeps his actors and scenes moving at a seamless and rapid pace, which is exactly what it needs. Although at times *Elling* may seem like an extended British sitcom with its dry sense of humor, the fun, reality, laughs and its heart are genuine and real. Santa has dropped a lovely, laugh-out-loud, joyous package of comic mirth at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre.

Published November 22, 2010

Reviewed at Press Performance on November 18, 2010

Broadway Listings



INSANELY FUNNY: (left to right) Denis O'Hare, Jennifer Coolidge, Brendan Fraser in the new Broadway comedy, *Elling*.

Photo: Joan Marcus



ELLING

Laughs abound in *Elling*. Adapted from the 2002 Norwegian Oscar-nominated foreign film, the fun and merriment is nonstop as two misfits who are thrown together in the same room in an institution must now go out in the real world and make a life for themselves out there. The fun is watching how these two go about their daily routines and get adjusted to daily living. Brandon Fraser, making his Broadway debut, is delightful and has a charismatic presence as the lovable bearish oaf. However, the real treasure is Denis O'Hare in yet another one of his great performance as the unbalanced, poet-writing momma's boy. However, the two complement each other very well. Fun also comes as a daffy upstairs neighbor in the character of Jennifer Coolidge. Her deadpan delivery is priceless. Two other good performances are provided by Jeremy Shamos, playing a social worker, and Richard Easton, as the famous poet who befriends Elling. In *Elling*, the laughs and its heart are genuine and real. Santa has dropped a lovely, laugh-out-loud package at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, and it is a real crowd-pleaser.

ETHEL BARRYMORE THEATRE, 243 West 47th Street, (212-239-6200).

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