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TRANSATLANTIC TRIUMPH: Mark Rylance's performance as a charming drug dealer in *Jerusalem* won him an Olivier, and the British actor (*in the Broadway production, photos right and left*) will certainly be remembered on this side of the Atlantic at Tony time. Photos: Simon Annand

Theater Review

Mark Rylance is dramatic force in *Jerusalem*



JERUSALEM

Written by Jez Butterworth

Directed by Ian Rickson

Through July 24, 2011

The Music Box Theatre

239 W. 45th Street

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

By Scott Harrah

Anglophiles on both sides of the Atlantic (specifically those who studied the classic English Romantic poetry of Keats, Yeats, Byron, Blake, and Shelley in college and the rural English and Irish mythology of the British Isles) will appreciate *Jerusalem* for its florid dialogue, countless references to poet William Blake and regional English culture. However, when the show debuted in England at the Royal Court Theatre in 2009, some drama critics in the United Kingdom only half-jokingly said the show could use subtitles for even the hippest Londoners unfamiliar with the story's arcane narrative. At three hours long, in three acts, *Jerusalem* is hardly lighthearted theater fare, and will seem obtuse, incomprehensible and obscure to most American audiences, but there is one aspect of the tragicomic story that keeps us mesmerized throughout the show, and his name is Mark Rylance.

Mr. Rylance, who won a Tony in 2008 for his role in the revival of *Boeing Boeing*, is hardly a household name in America, unless one is a regular Broadway theatergoer. Those who saw his must-see performance in *La Bete* earlier this season know that Mr. Rylance is an incredible stage actor, and his role in *Jerusalem* is no exception. From his manic mannerisms, staccato delivery of dialogue to his gift for nonverbal, physical comedy, he is a true thespian in every sense. He is mesmerizing whenever he is on stage, and it is impossible to take our eyes off him. As lead character Johnny "Rooster" Byron, a former daredevil who lives in a trailer in the English woods and sells drugs to the locals (many of them underage minors), Mr. Rylance is a dramatic force that sweeps through the show like a metaphorical hurricane, leaving emotional destruction

everywhere in his path. Rylance's performance is complex, confusing, nerve-wracking, and often defies logic, but is never dull, and he is certainly going to be remembered at Tony time.

If Londoners were perplexed by the show, then some Americans might definitely need a translation guide to comprehend many of the story's references to Old England, local BBC shows, St. George's Day (the U.K. holiday named after England's patron saint, on which the story takes place), and the William Blake poem *Jerusalem* from 1804 that discusses "England's green and pleasant land" and not the holy ancient city in Israel.

Playwright Jez Butterworth weaves a rich but often confusing, pretentious yarn about the misfits that gravitate toward Rylance's Johnny "Rooster" Byron: the magnificent Mackenzie Crook (of U.K. "The Office" fame) as Ginger, the good-natured, drug-addled DJ who seems to be Johnny's only real friend; Lee (John Gallagher, Jr.), a young man preparing for a move to Australia; and Alan David as The Professor, an aging, dotty man. Several young women, from druggies to Phaedra (Aimee-Ffion Edwards), the May Queen who dresses as a fairy, also hang out at Johnny's trailer, which is about to be condemned by the local village. Most of Johnny's coteries of misfits are there to consume his massive quantities of alcohol and drugs, and have little interest in him other than a supplier for their vices.

There are some genuine touching moments here, particularly when Johnny tries unsuccessfully to bond with his six-year-old son, Marky (played at various performances by Aiden Eyrick and Mark Page), from ex-wife, Dawn (Geraldine Hughes). However, the overall storyline, under Ian Rickson's scattershot direction, is proverbially over our heads much of the time.

In act three, it is never quite explained why Johnny sheds his tank top and too-tight trousers and sports a tailored suit that makes him look more like a Canary Wharf stockbroker than a bucolic pariah of the English countryside. However, when he launches into an incantation-like soliloquy at the play's end, banging a drum and shrieking out poetic dialogue like a beatnik on a bad acid trip, it almost does not matter that audiences will be perplexed as to the point of it all because, in these final moments, Mr. Rylance has us in a trance, glued to his every move as he blathers about everything that has brought him to his tragic fall from grace. Does all this mind-numbing posturing make much sense? That is debatable, but Mr. Rylance still gives what is certainly going to be one of the most-talked-about performances of the year.

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Editor's Note: www.StageZine.com, celebrating our 1-Year Anniversary on the Internet. We want to express our gratitude to all the theater PR professionals, industry organizations, and, most of all, our readers, followers and fans for their continued support and kind words throughout the past year, helping make www.StageZine.com a success.

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