



TOUCHDOWN: Dan Lauria (top) & Judith Light in winning football drama *Lombardi*, about legendary NFL coach Vince Lombardi. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

***Lombardi*, about gridiron icon, scores with winning performances**

Lombardi

Written by Eric Simonson

Directed by Thomas Kail

Circle In The Square Theatre

West 50th Street, West of Broadway

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

By Scott Harrah

The late Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi, who died of colon cancer in 1970, is the subject of Eric Simonson's compelling bio-drama, *Lombardi*. Granted, there has been a lot of press about the show being produced in association with the NFL and the fact that football fans aren't exactly your average Broadway theatergoer, but does the show have enough merit to stand on its own as a drama? Thankfully, it does, primarily due to Dan Lauria's incandescent, animated portrayal of the New York native and gridiron icon, and Judith Light's equally superb take on his devoted wife, Marie.

At times, Oscar-winning playwright Eric Simonson's script, based on the bestselling biography *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi*, by Pulitzer Prize winner David Maraniss, has the feel of a TV movie, but Thomas Kail directs the cast with enough dramatic timing and precision to make the actors transcend the limitations of the material.

Set primarily in 1965, in locations ranging from Green Bay, WI to Englewood, NJ, *Lombardi* is mostly a forum for Mr. Lauria's boisterous interpretation of the tough-talking coach, and Ms. Light's unforgettable, complex Marie Lombardi. Even if one isn't a regular football fan, it is virtually impossible to not know at least something about the play's namesake, for the Super Bowl trophy was renamed the Vince Lombardi Trophy in 1970, and the man was a virtual encyclopedia of quotable quotes such as, "Winning is not everything but making the effort to win is." Mr. Lauria, however, does not simply recite Lombardi's famous words; he infuses the brash, Italian-American character with conviction and humility. The 90-minute play skims over most of Lombardi's career, only mentioning his stint as a teacher in Catholic schools, and mostly focuses on how he took the Green Bay Packers from a losing team to national champions.

Ms. Light's Marie is a caring woman who happens to have a penchant for chain smoking and cocktails, but will sacrifice anything for the sake of her husband. Equally intriguing is Keith Nobbs as Michael McCormick, a sportswriter from *Look* magazine who has traveled to Green Bay to write a feature on Lombardi, and finds the assignment to be the ultimate challenge of his career, both personally and

professionally.

There are outstanding supporting performances from Robert Christopher Riley, Bill Dawes, and Chris Sullivan as Green Bay Packers team members Dave Robinson, Paul Hornung, and Jim Taylor, all of whom take lots of verbal abuse from Coach Lombardi, but realize he will do anything for them. One does not have to be a football fanatic to appreciate *Lombardi*, because there is enough superlative acting and drama here to satisfy even audiences who never watch the game.

Published October 31, 2010

Reviewed at Press Performance on October 29, 2010

Broadway Listings



'LOMBARDI' SCORES: (left to right) Keith Nobbs as sportswriter Michael McCormick & Dan Lauria as Vince Lombardi in 'Lombardi.' Photo: Joan Marcus



LOMBARDI

Finally, a Broadway show for sports enthusiasts, designed as a play for the working man/athlete who wouldn't regularly attend the theater. Here is a play to which they can go and relate. A bio-drama about Vince Lombardi (Dan Lauria) who was going to be a bank manager, but at the last moment was offered a coaching job with the Green Bay Packers, and in one season took them from last place to the championship spot, and that winning streak continued till 1968. The show has lots of good moments, be it on the field training his men, Paul Hornung, Jim Taylor, and Dave Robinson, or at home arguing with his wife, Marie, (a delightful Judith Light), or being interviewed by a *Look* magazine writer, Michael McCormick (Keith Nobbs).

Lombardi best illustrates this man's total passion and love for the sport and for his men. As brutal as he was with them, they loved him just as much. Dan Lauria is great as Lombardi; he gives you the essence of this imperfect flawed man known as Lombardi, and why he was loved

by all his players: Flawed with his family, but a God on the field. I can honestly say that, at the performance I attended, there wasn't a single man there watching this play that wasn't wishing that he could have been trained by Lombardi or had the chance to sit and talk to him.

CIRCLE IN THE SQUARE THEATRE, West 50th Street, West of Broadway, (212-239-6200).

www.LombardiBroadway.com

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