



**LOOPY LAUGHS:** Brian Hutchison and Valerie Harper in *Looped*. Photo: Carol Rosegg

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***Theater Review***

**Valerie Harper gives the performance  
of her career as Tallulah Bankhead in *Looped***

***Looped***

**Written by Matthew Lombardo**

**Directed by Rob Ruggiero**

**Lyceum Theatre**

**149 West 45th Street**

**New York, NY (212-239-6200), [www.loopedonbroadway.com](http://www.loopedonbroadway.com)**

**By Scott Harrah**

It is rare indeed when an actor can transcend limited material with a performance that is so incandescent and riveting that one easily forgets any shortcomings the show's script might have, but Valerie Harper is exactly this type of performer. Harper is emotionally explosive, hilarious, and unforgettable in every scene of *Looped*, the new comedy based on the legendary Tallulah Bankhead that recently opened on Broadway.

It is truly a challenge for any actor to play a vintage icon from yesteryear, especially one as outrageous as Bankhead, without doing a caricature. However, Valerie Harper—herself an icon, best known for playing Rhoda Morgenstern on TV's "Mary Tyler Moore" and the spin-off "Rhoda" in the 1970s—gives what just might be the finest performance of her career in *Looped*. Harper never tries to send-up or satirize Bankhead, a stage and screen actress known as much for her bad-girl behavior, heavy drug and alcohol use, and scandalous sexual exploits as she was for her countless West End and Broadway roles, and appearances in classic films such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat*.

Clad in a mink coat, satin evening gown, her animated face smeared with makeup as she chain-smokes, swills scotch and snorts cocaine, Harper nails Bankhead in every sense, from the raspy voice and over-the-top delivery of Oscar Wilde-style epigrams and bitchy bon mots to her booze-and-drug-fueled tantrums. Tallulah Bankhead was one of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's most infamous queens of camp, with the hyperbolic mannerisms of a drag queen. When Harper's Bankhead says in the play, "There are only two types of men: those who want to f\*\*\*k me, and those who want to *be* me," it is obvious La Tallulah knew she was a walking parody of herself. What is so outstanding about Harper's portrayal of Bankhead is her natural sense of comic timing, and the way she manages to add a sense of depth and vulnerability to the pathetic character, making this larger-than-life woman seem human.

*Looped* is based on a summer day in 1965 in Los Angeles, as Bankhead enters a recording studio to "loop" one line of dialogue from one of her last films, the B-movie stinker, *Die! Die! My Darling!* The line didn't record properly, so Bankhead has been called into the studio to re-record this simple piece of dialogue that is crucial to the film's plot. The problem is that Bankhead is so drunk and high on drugs that she cannot complete the line without slurring her words or constantly interrupting the frustrated film editor, Danny (Brian Hutchison) as the tech man Steve (Michael Mulheren), perched above the stage in a sound booth, is forced to keep doing take after take.

The running joke that Bankhead cannot finish recording the line wears thin after awhile, and not much happens in Matthew Lombardo's witty but thinly constructed narrative. There isn't much of a plot here, and *Looped* is primarily a forum for Harper's virtuoso interpretation of Bankhead, who spends much of the play telling raunchy anecdotes about her colorful life, and recalling, with much regret, how she turned down the original Broadway role of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (which she claims Tennessee Williams wrote especially for her) because she felt Blanche was too close to the real-life Tallulah: an aging, neurotic Southern belle.

In one of the play's better moments, Harper's Tallulah brilliantly delivers one of Blanche's famous monologues from *Streetcar* to Danny, showing that she could have easily played the role that went instead to Jessica Tandy. This is done to appease Danny, who says he saw Bankhead in an infamous revival of *Streetcar* in Florida in which she was so drunk and inept that the audience howled with laughter each time she spoke.

Brian Hutchison as Danny, and Michael Mulheren as Steve, give first-rate supporting performances as two men failing miserably to get Bankhead to stop babbling about herself and focus on finishing "looping" the line from the movie.

Matthew Lombardo's script is loaded with enough catty one-liners to keep everything amusing even though much of the action drags, and Rob Ruggiero's direction keeps things moving at a swift pace. *Looped* could have easily been trimmed down to a one act, and subplots about Danny's past seem tacked on as filler in the second act. Regardless, *Looped* is a trenchant vehicle for Valerie Harper, and her performance is seamless, stratospheric, and ultimately moving as we watch her depiction of Bankhead descend into the depths of despair. Harper's top-notch take on Bankhead is undoubtedly one of the highlights of the spring 2010 season.

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