



MEN WITHOUT HATS: (left to right) Bobby Cannavale, Yul Vázquez, & Chris Rock in *The Motherfuker with the Hat*. Photo: Joan Marcus**

Theater Review

**A 'hat' full of
pain in gritty
urban drama**

*The
Motherfu**ker
with the Hat*



THE MOTHERFUKER WITH THE HAT**

Written by Stephen Adly Guirgis

Directed by Anna D. Shapiro

Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre

236 West 45th Street

212-239-6200, www.TheMFwiththeHat.com

By Scott Harrah

Unfortunately, Broadway has so few new American dramas, and that is a shame. Hollywood films may be America's greatest entertainment export, but jazz music and American musical comedies for the stage are perhaps our nation's most important contributions to highbrow culture in the world. So why are there so few American stage dramas? The majority of new, original stage dramas on Broadway either come from the United Kingdom or Ireland. That is why this reviewer personally gets more excited about a new American drama than any

Broadway musical because serious theater, also known as “straight shows,” more than anything, mirror the cultural Zeitgeist of the USA, from era of the great American playwrights of yesteryear such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O’Neill, and Edward Albee to contemporary, 21st Century stage scribes like Tracey Letts, David Lindsay-Abaire, and Neil LaBute. We can now add playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis to the list of great American dramatists of the New Millennium with his explosive new Broadway drama with the unprintable, provocative title, *The Motherf**ker with the Hat*.

Mr. Guirgis’ play, directed with fluid precision by the remarkable Anna D. Shapiro (who directed Tracey Letts’ modern classic *August: Osage County*), is, on the surface, a simplistic urban domestic chronicle of infidelity, lies, betrayal, alcohol and substance abuse, and could easily have come across as melodramatic without the proper direction and dynamic acting.

Comedian Chris Rock is the big-name star here, playing Ralph D., an Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor for the troubled Jackie (Bobby Cannavale of "Will and Grace" fame). However, Mr. Rock’s competent yet serviceable performance is almost completely overshadowed by the remaining cast members, including Elizabeth Rodriguez as Veronica, Jackie’s equally mixed-up, dysfunctional girlfriend. In the very first scene, when Veronica shrieks at her mother on a cell phone, every muscle in her face is tense, and she seamlessly shouts out her lines with the ferocity of any crazed, maniacal woman worn down by years of bad luck, cocaine addiction, and misfortune.

When Mr. Cannavale and Ms. Rodriguez are on the stage, their volatile chemistry is truly riveting. Both actors have all the manic mannerisms, rapid-fire, staccato delivery and proverbial fireworks that make their characters not just natural, but often heartbreaking and brutally realistic. They are like Latino versions of George and Martha in Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but without the intellectual pretensions. They could be any down-on-their-luck, troubled couple in urban America, with all the squabbling and suspicion that tears relationships apart. It is not often that we see such virtuoso acting on Broadway, especially from lesser-known stars, but it is a sure bet that both Mr. Cannavale and Ms. Rodriguez have a good chance of landing Tony nominations.

Annabella Sciorra (of “Sopranos” fame) beautifully supports Mr. Cannavale and Ms. Rodriguez as Victoria, Ralph’s understanding wife. Ms. Sciorra’s Victoria is a tough, no-nonsense woman who knows her husband is not the saint he pretends to be. When Jackie seeks refuge in Ralph and Victoria’s home after an ugly altercation with Veronica, he gradually learns that the unpleasant truth about Ralph.

Yul Vázquez, as Jackie's eccentric Cousin Julio, exquisitely portrays a man obsessed with health-food products, tending to his collection of plants, working out, and watching pulpy action movies. Cousin Julio has always liked Jackie and tried to help him through his many problems, but to no avail because, as Jackie tells him, "You're strange, bro." Mr. Vázquez plays the lovable Cousin Julio with a wacky sense of charm and wisdom, and he has some of the show's best funny one-liners, which add badly needed comic relief to this intense tale.

This is a quintessential New York story about emotionally haggard couples that could be in any neighborhood in the five boroughs. Playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis peppers much of the dialogue with Nuyorican slang and plenty of profanity, but there's a rhythmic quality to the words that make the characters that much more convincing. Arthur Miller wrote lines for characters in the slang and clichés of the 1950s in *Death of a Salesman*, and although Bobby Cannavale's Jackie is certainly no Willy Loman, he conveys the same sense of hopelessness that rings with the working-class veracity of the great "everyman" of classic theater.

Todd Rosenthal's innovative, high-tech scenic design anchors the show marvelously, taking us back and forth between Jackie and Veronica's humble apartment, Cousin Julio's plant-filled sanctuary, and Victoria and Ralph's abode. We never see stagehands rushing between scenes to rearrange things around in the dark, as the set changes automatically with technical wizardry, moving quickly from scene to scene, and giving the play the look and feel of a well-crafted movie. There are so few great dramas on Broadway, but *The Motherf**cker with the Hat* should definitely be on any theatergoer's "must-see" list during this busy spring season.

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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.

Broadway Listings

NouNou On Broadway

Broadway Capsule Reviews by David NouNou



'THE MOTHERFUKER WITH THE HAT': (left to right) Bobby Cannavale & Chris Rock**

Photo: Joan Marcus



THE MOTHERFUKER WITH THE HAT**

An urban dramedy served raw and gritty, courtesy of Stephen Adly Guirgis. He is a powerful writer who has taken life's unfortunate circumstances and turned them into a theatrical happening. Mr. Guirgis tackles heavy subjects such as addiction, be it sexual, drug or alcoholism, rehab, sponsors, as well as infidelity, marital strife, friendships (real or imagined), and life's lost opportunities. Amongst all these heady subjects, he manages to infuse genuine laugh-out-loud humor. At every turn, there is a laugh, albeit at times even heartbreaking.

There are four virtuoso performances taking place on the stage. No theatrics; just raw, exposed nerves and emotional meltdowns. Bobby Cannavale as Jackie, the recovering institutionalized alcoholic, is giving a powerful performance of a lifetime. He has finally been given a part to show his dramatic range. Elizabeth Rodriguez as his cocaine-addicted girlfriend Veronica is flawless. Here is one Latina lady with a temper you do not want to mess with. Annabella Sciorra as Victoria, the long-suffering wife of the sponsor, is perfection in her meltdown scene. Last but not least is Yul Vázquez as Jackie's Cousin Julio, who gives a priceless performance. His "is he or is he not gay?" performance is a true standout. Unfortunately, the main attraction of this piece

Chris Rock as Ralph D., Jackie's sponsor, does not deliver the necessary theatrical goods. Mr. Rock is a stand-up comedian and movie actor and does not have the theatrical technique needed for such a powerful piece. A lot of his scenes come up uneven against the people with which he is performing.

Kudos must be given to Anna D. Shapiro for her fast-paced, nonstop direction. She has the proceedings constantly moving, with never a dull moment or letting the subject matter become lumbered or morose. I also have to mention the excellent sets by Todd Rosenthal. He has created three separate apartments that change magically before our eyes. The sets capture all the essence of their seediness and anchor the show spectacularly. No long intervals where stagehands are moving furniture; just seamless scene changes and, for the most part, a flawless play.

GERALD SCHOENFELD THEATRE, 236 West 45th Street, (212-239-6200).

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