



BOOZE, BIGOTRY & GLORY DAYS IN 'THAT CHAMPIONSHIP SEASON': (left to right) Jason Patric, Chris Noth, Kiefer Sutherland, Brian Cox, Jim Gaffigan. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

That Championship Season fails to score



That Championship Season

Written by Jason Miller

Directed by Gregory Mosher

Through May 29, 2011

Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre

242 West 45th Street

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

By David NouNou

The 1970s did not generate a lot of great plays, especially American dramas. The three best and most memorable would probably have been *That Championship Season*, *Equus*, and *The Elephant Man*. Two of them dealt with British subject matter; only one of them was really American in both subject and content, which earned it both the Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award. Having seen the original 1972 version of Jason Miller's *That Championship Season* and remember loving it and thinking it was one of the best plays of the 70s, I now ask myself why? I wonder what bewilders me more: the content being so anti-Semitic and racist, or not remembering and seeing how anti-Jewish and racially prejudice the content actually was. I am sure it was not playwright Jason Miller's intention to be anti-Semitic and racist, but mirroring the voice of the day. However, I found the play's anti-Jewish sensibilities, frequent usage of the "n" word, and Italians being referred to as "dagos" hard to take, and downright offensive.

The story is set in 1972 at a high-school basketball coach's home, in the Lackawanna Valley, Pennsylvania on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the team's victory of the state championship. This year, four of the original team members return to relive and celebrate this victory with their coach (Brian Cox). The four members who attend are George Sikowski (Jim Gaffigan); Polish; Phil Romano (Chris Noth), the "dago" Italian; James Daley (Kiefer Sutherland); and Tom Daley (Jason Patric), brothers and one assumes Irish because of their last name.

As each character enters, we learn that George is the milquetoast town mayor running for re-election against a "Jewish kike"; Phil is the rich "dago" that everyone likes for his wealth and campaign support, and has slept with the mayor's wife; James is the invisible high school principal, who has been passed over all his life and only wants respect; and his brother, Tom, now the town drunk. Of course, these four were all once-vibrant young men who were a well-oiled machine and played as one, thanks to their driving coach, who won the state championship back in 1952. The evening starts as a fun reunion, but as the drinking takes over, we are transported to an evening of a cross between the clawing of *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* and the annihilation of *The Boys In The Band* and how these men now feel about each other. Oh, yes, let us not forget the coach, the man who has imbued them with platitudes such as "winning is everything", and "losing is not an option"; "win at all costs." The coach is also a huge anti-Semite and racist, who by the end of the evening rallies his boys together to beat the "Jewish kike" in the upcoming mayoral elections at any cost because, in his words, "We have to stand together; it is us against them." The coach has obvious issues with all races and ethnic groups and he has instilled these reprehensible qualities in his boys, all of whom are now middle-aged men.

It is an ensemble piece. However, in this go round, Jason Patric, who also happens to be the son of the late playwright Jason Miller, comes off best. He has his part nailed. Chris Noth and Jim Gaffigan do lend stage presence, but at times come off buffoonish rather than real characters. Kiefer Sutherland does not have a real grasp of his character, and Brian Cox, a British actor, as the coach, is over-the-top and has problems remembering that he is playing an American character. Gregory Mosher is a brilliantly subtle director in his own right, but does not serve his cast or this dated play well. Instead of fine-tuning them to play as a well-oiled singularly functioning team, they are fumbling all over the court/stage.

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