



DARK 'HOUSE': (left to right) Ben Stiller, Edie Falco, & Jennifer Jason Leigh in the latest revival of John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves*. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

The House of Blue Leaves: something to be desired



THE HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES

Written by John Guare

Directed by David Cromer

Walter Kerr Theatre

219 West 48th Street

New York, NY

212-239-6200, HouseOfBlueLeaves.com

By David NouNou

One always has to be grateful for rare revivals, especially when they are done intermittently once every few years. Not only do they reflect the times they were written in, but also one's own life, perceptions, and perspectives. Having seen *The House of Blue Leaves* in its original 1971 Off-Broadway inception as a teenager, I dismissed it as "my version" of theater of the absurd. It was way ahead of its time, especially for someone weaned on Neil Simon comedies. Then, in 1986, as I was approaching middle age, I saw the excellent Lincoln Center version with John Mahoney, Stockard Channing, Swoozie Kurtz, and a young Ben Stiller as Ronny, and impeccable direction by Jerry Zaks; it blew me away. I saw it as a brilliant black comedy. Now, as I'm nearing maturity, in this current version, I saw the absurdity and the black comedy in the text, but as directed by David Cromer, I saw nothing but a black hole of despair, with none of the humor as it was intended by playwright John Guare.

Set in Sunnyside, Queens, in 1965 with a grab-bag mix of oddball characters, the play centers around the things we long and yearn for in life, and how we go about getting them, and if we ever get them. Do we get what we want because we worked hard for it? Earned it? Deserved it? Stumbled upon it? Prayed for it? Or just through dumb luck? Then there is the flip side: the people who don't get what they desire or want. Is it due to self-delusion? Bad luck? The breaks? Wrong time/wrong place? Or just being a born loser? Each one of the characters in this play longs for and desires something. Some of them end up getting it; and some of them never do.

We see Artie Shaughnessy (Ben Stiller) zookeeper by day, cabaret singer/songwriter by night, longing to write songs and scores for Hollywood movies. Bananas Shaughnessy, his wife (Edie Falco), is a

schizophrenic, wanting just to feel things and emotions without being medicated and deprived of those feelings. Bunny Flingus (Jennifer Jason Leigh) is Artie's downstairs neighbor and is having an affair with him in front of Bananas. Bunny longs to go to Hollywood with him and hobnob with the swells. Ronny Shaughnessy (Christopher Abbott), the son of Artie and Bananas and AWOL from the army, wants to blow up the Pope, who is visiting New York that day. Billy Eichhorn (Thomas Sadoski), premier Hollywood director and a friend of Artie's since childhood, is going to Australia and wants to do a film on kangaroos. Corrinna Stoller (Alison Pill) Hollywood actress and Billy's lover, is also headed Down Under, seeking surgery to get her hearing back. Oh, yes, there are also the three nuns visiting the city to see the Pope and just glad to be out of the convent. All of them are yearning for something.

Unfortunately, Mr. Stiller is miscast as Artie. After all, he is supposed to be Irish-American and full of blarney (please, no texts or e-mails to let me know that Anne Meara is his mother and is Irish-American, making him 50% Irish). What is missing here is the requisite Irish-American charm, and the gift of gab. Mr. Stiller is good, but lacks the chemistry needed with Bananas and the rest of the cast.

Ms. Falco, as Bananas, is exceptional. In fact, she nearly steals the whole show. What an actress. Is there anything this woman cannot do? Every expression on her face registers all her fears, anxieties, desperation, hope, and even a sense of humor. We totally forget that Ms. Falco made a name for herself playing Carmella Soprano and Nurse Jackie. Here, Ms. Falco shows her enormous range as an actress because her take on Bananas is extraordinarily uncanny: a woman torn apart by madness and her overmedicated reality. Let's hope that, come Tony time, she is placed as Best Supporting Actress as Swoozie Kurtz was and won and not Best Actress because she would have a better chance of winning in the former category.

Ms. Jason Leigh, a wonderful actress in her own right, is another victim of being miscast. Instead of being zany, adventurous and gutsy, she comes across as loud, pathetically obnoxious, and overbearing. And why is she made up to look like Juliette Lewis? Alison Pill, as the movie star in her all-too-brief role, is sheer delight. Thomas Sadoski and Christopher Abbott, as the director and son Ronny, are impressionable in their roles.

It is wonderful to have the likes of Ben Stiller, Edie Falco, and Jennifer Jason Leigh all in one show on Broadway because they certainly help generate box-office business and interest in plays like *The House of Blue Leaves* to get revived. However, one would have hoped for a more seasoned director than Mr. Cromer to have the vision to bring out the much-needed dark humor of this show; and been able to assist Mr. Stiller and Ms. Jason Leigh to give better performances.

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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

DRAMA & COMEDY REVIVALS



'DARK' DUO: Ben Stiller & the superb Edie Falco in revival of *The House of Blue Leaves*. Photo: Joan Marcus



THE HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES

It is great to have Ben Stiller, Edie Falco, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Alison Pill, and Thomas Sadoski in John Guare's black comedy *The House of Blue Leaves*. Unfortunately for the show, as directed by David Cromer, the black comedy is missing here. A more seasoned director was needed to see all the comic possibilities in this play. Instead, Mr. Cromer just focuses on the dark side and (like some of the characters) misses out on some great opportunities. Even the set and lighting are—dare I say it again? — on the dark side.

Mr. Stiller and Ms. Jason Leigh are miscast and need better direction: Mr. Stiller, to bring out his charm; and Ms. Jason Leigh needs her loud and overbearing performance reined in more. Ms. Falco is sensational as the schizophrenic wife (Bananas), and I am sure she dug deep within herself to get to her wonderful performance. The show is worth visiting not only for the stars that are in it, but also for playwright John Guare's deft writing about people's elusive desires. He gives us great insight into the ones who get what they want and the ones who do not, and elicits humor from their unfortunate circumstances.

WALTER KERR THEATRE, 219 West 48th Street, (212-239-6200)

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