

'It's Only a Play' but everyone's a critic

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By Florida Weekly Staff | on August 08, 2018

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From left: Danielle Channell, Scott Carpenter, Dave Matthew Chesebro star in "It's Only a Play." COURTESY PHOTO

Laboratory Theater of Florida's latest production may be called "It's Only a Play," but what a play it is!

The word "only" in the title should be in quotes, because this is so much more than a simple play.

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It simultaneously satirizes modern American theater while also giving it a big sloppy kiss.

No wonder artistic director/founder Annette Trossbach has been trying for three years to obtain the rights to produce it.

It's finally here, and it's worth the wait.

"It's Only a Play" was written by fourtime Tony Award-winning playwright Terrence McNally, who has also written "Master Class," "Lips Together, Teeth Apart" and "Love! Valour! Compassion!" among others. He also wrote the book for the Broadway musical production of "Kiss of the Spider Woman" and the libretto of

“Ragtime” (with Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty.)

The action is set in the bedroom of Broadway producer Julia Budder. (Judging by her décor, the woman seems to have an obsession with flowers and floral patterns.) It’s opening night of “The Golden Egg,” and there’s an after-party at her posh Manhattan townhouse.

Double doors center stage allow all the actors to make grand entrances.

First we meet Gus (Cameron Rogers), a young man hoping to make his way into theater. He’s working the party, bringing people drinks and lugging their coats to the bedroom in what becomes a running gag. Pretty soon, you’re trying to guess what cast has arrived by the coats Gus is carrying.

He’s soon joined by James Wicker (Scott Carpenter), a TV series star who is best friends with the playwright, Peter (Dave Chesebro). James was offered the lead role, but turned it down, because he thought the play horrible. And now that he’s seen it on opening night, he’s convinced he’s right. “The Golden Egg,” he declares, is a turkey, though he falsely praises it to everyone involved with it.

He marvels that the actors in this Broadway show all have to stand on a tilted disc for the duration of the play.

“Give me a comfortable chair and a phone for exposition,” says James, sitting in a floral armchair and talking on the phone, advancing the plot. The play is filled with clever lines and situations like this. (Soon after, he’s preening in the mirror while complaining about “the egos in this business!”)

He’s catty, throwing more shade than an oversized beach umbrella.

This is a theater show about theater people that name-checks actors, directors, producers, critics and shows. The characters complain about the British taking over Broadway, about popular movies turned into musicals, TV and movie celebrities appearing onstage, shows that rely too much on special effects and the Disneyfication of Broadway.

There’s so much name-dropping in this play, from Liza Minnelli to Lady Gaga to Betty Buckley to Neil Simon to Renee Fleming to Bernadette Peters, just to mention a handful, that Mr. McNally would’ve dropped fewer names if he’d knocked a “Who’s Who” off a table.

It also name-checks New York Times theater critic Ben Brantley and refers to “The Moose Murders,” historically the worst show on Broadway, closing the same night it opened.

If you’re involved in the theater, or a theater enthusiast, you’ll probably get most of the jokes. (The night I attended, many of them seemed to be going over the head of the audience.)



Mr. McNally even weaves a few of his previous play titles into the dialogue, but not as names of plays. I caught "Love! Valour! Compassion!" and "Corpus Christi," and I think I may have also heard "Master Class," though the dialogue races by so quickly, I'm not positive.

It's the simplest of premises. It's the evening of opening night, and they're all waiting for the reviews to come out. If they're positive, "The Golden Egg" has a future. If not, they may have to close.

Danielle Channell plays the dim-witted producer who slaughters lines from famous movies and well-known songs. She speaks in a high, baby-ish voice, and I wondered if that was her natural voice or if she was trying to impersonate Megan Mullally, who played the role on Broadway.

Mr. Carpenter is sharp as the gossipy, aging TV actor who wants the show to be panned so he'll be proven right for turning down the lead role. Mr. Rogers is green and clueless as a young wannabe actor. He wants to act, but he doesn't know Broadway history, and has more ambition than talent.

Aricka Shuck plays Virginia Noyes, a train wreck of an actress who's a lead in "The Golden Egg." She keeps a small pharmacy in her purse and her probation ankle monitor goes off during her opening night performance. Her character, who is both luminescent and pretty, is a walking disaster. She made me laugh when she slid off a chair in a drug-induced haze; she was like liquid, or a silk robe gliding to the floor.

Mr. Chesebro, as the playwright, could play his role with a little more conviction. It also falls to him to deliver some of the play's more serious lines. And, he leads the cast in some of the most fervent praying I've ever seen onstage.

John Daniel Strealy is Sir Frank Finger, the kleptomaniac director who is weary of his constant theatrical success. Though he's supposed to be young, the actor appears a little too young to have had a string of 14 hits behind him already.

The outsider in this play is Ira Drew (Todd Lyman), a vicious theater critic. (Some would consider that description redundant.) He reviews (and skewers) but really wants to be a playwright. Mr. Lyman plays him as fey and prone to fits of giggles. The actor bears a striking resemblance to a former local theater critic and shares part of a name with another. It's disconcerting, to say the least.

Ms. Trossbach, the director, has cleverly staged him as an outsider from time to time, watching from a distance everything else that's going on onstage.

Ms. Trossbach also gives us some clever music pre-show and during intermission: "Showoff" (from "The Drowsy Chaperone"), "I Wanna Be a Producer," Ethel Merman belting out "There's No Business Like Show Business."

And, post-show, if you pay attention, you'll hear Taylor Swift singing "Shake It Off."

If you love theater you'll enjoy "It's Only a Play," with its uncertain, vulnerable, talented, flawed characters.

There may be no business like show business, but "It's Only a Play" takes us behind the scenes and reveals it for the monkey business it is. †

'It's Only a Play'

>> When: through Aug. 26

>> Where: The Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., Fort Myers

>> Cost: \$28, \$25 for military and seniors, \$10 for students with ID

>> Information: 218-0481 or laboratorytheaterflorida.com

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