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Slapped silly

Boys of BitchSlap! are back with gut-splitting comedy

By COLIN MACLEAN

BitchSlap! is one of those rare comedies where you start laughing in the first five seconds and don't stop until the final bow.

I don't have to tell anyone who saw its first production at the Fringe a couple of years back that this is one funny show. In the interim, BitchSlap! has played all over North America and has been tweaked and polished to a high lustre. Or as polished as two guys in wigs and dresses playing two of Hollywood's greatest stars will ever get.

The camp here is as high as a tent on Everest.

BitchSlap! has settled in for an 11-day run at the Roxy Theatre.

UGLY RIVALRY

Darrin Hagen wrote the work, loosely based on the famous feud between Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. He also plays Crawford with her impenetrable wigs and padded shoulders. It's directed with a sure hand by Trevor Schmidt, who plays Davis. They are greatly assisted by the indispensable Davina Stewart as the Queen of Gossip, Hedda Hopper. Stewart keeps the narrative from going completely off the tracks as she conducts a series of supposed interviews with the two divine divas looking for "the dirt."

And my, the dirt was there. Davis was the hardscrabble actress who got by on sheer talent and fought the big studios for better roles. Crawford began in silent films and parlayed a modicum of talent (and a judicious use of her sexuality) into a career as a star.

The smoldering feud between the divas burst into the open during the making of their 1962 horror flick, Whatever Happened to Baby Jane.

DRAMA QUEENS

The two leads create memorable caricatures and are gloriously over the top. It's fun to watch two pros working a script, and an audience, for all their worth. But they are too good as actors just to play for the laughs - there is an undercurrent of desperation, as two smart, sassy, strong but aging women watched the good roles and their careers drifting away.

The ending won't leave in you tears, but there will be a catch in your throat.

The production makes good use of film clips. It begins with a hilarious series of slaps taken from all sorts of films and moves on to show the divas in some of their best roles. Schmidt makes sure BitchSlap! moves along smartly. Good use is made of the gorgeous old Warner Brothers/Max Steiner soundtracks from Davis' films.

Original, bawdy, sharp and very, very funny, they don't make stars like these any more.

Sad.

Four Suns.

BitchSlap!, a production of Guys and Disguise, plays through to Dec. 9 at the Roxy Theatre,

10708 124 St.