



Tuesday » December
4 » 2007

Hollywood slapfest hits the mark with gusto and wit

Restaging of the legendary feud between Bette Davis and Joan Crawford improves upon Fringe debut

Liz Nicholls

The Edmonton Journal

Sunday, December 02, 2007

THEATRE PREVIEW

BitchSlap!

Theatre: Guys in Disguise

Written by: Darrin Hagen

Directed by: Trevor Schmidt

Starring: Trevor Schmidt, Darrin Hagen, Davina Stewart

Where: Theatre Network at the Roxy

Running: Through Dec. 9

Tickets and info: 453-2440 or Tix on the Square (420-1757)

EDMONTON - BitchSlap! opens with one of the most bracing introductions of the season. Assembled by multimedia designer Ian Jackson, it is a historical survey of onscreen Hollywood slaps to the face, landed with resounding gusto by Tinseltown divas who wind up and let 'er rip.

It's enough to dislodge your fillings. Before the vibrations have subsided, there they are in the flesh, movie icons large as life ... no, I misspeak, larger.

What Darrin Hagen has created, what Trevor Schmidt directs and what they both bring to life in bold, reverberant, high-gloss performances, is a kind of bitches' vaudeville. It's the legendary Hollywood feud between Bette Davis (Schmidt) and Joan Crawford (Hagen), largely in their own words -- amazing in itself considering the level of wit on display in this very funny show. And the upstaging battle between The Actress and The Star, Bette and Joan, is framed (and fuelled) by the onstage device of a third character, publicity as it were, as embodied by gossip maven Hedda Hopper.

Since BitchSlap! got its first good smack at us, at the 2005 Fringe, it's grown more rhythmic. The delicate archness of Davina Stewart as gossip diva Hedda Hopper has more to do with it, it seems to me. The chemistry of acid and oil, in Bette and Joan, is more explosive now, too. In this remount, the

differences are tuned to a higher frequency, and the music of the putdown rings out in glorious Dolby.

Under alarmingly lacquered bangs Hagen's riotous Joan launches outsized red lips into coy grimaces and puckers that could flatten car bodies. She's more poisonous now, dopey but calculating, layering a giant, unctuous, noblesse oblige smile on top of a veritable Fort Knox of loathing.

Schmidt is simply riveting as Bette: that crud-cutter voice, those self-dramatizing pauses, those screeching overtones that fling a steel-edged consonant at her rival the way Goldfinger's henchman Oddjob decapitated with his bowler. Crackling malice is Bette's specialty, and she forms it into incisive, crystalline objets d'art. Joan, she observes acidly, slept with everyone on the MGM lot "except Lassie." She was "the original good time that was had by all."

The makeup by James Ross is a character study in itself, incidentally: the wide, hooked arch of eyebrows that are intrinsic to Bette's repertoire of withering looks, the sneer built right into that lipsticked pout.

The vaudeville's running gag, and organizing principle, is the filming of the 1962 horror flick *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* which paired the aging rivals for the first time. It's first-rate comic choreography of one-upmanship and upstaging jokes. But the "man" in one-upmanship is germane here. In the end, Bette and Joan, and their advancing years, are up against The Man, vying for his approval and validation, and increasingly desperate.

Like another star once memorably said, "it's the pictures that got small." Alas, they also got young. *BitchSlap!* isn't exactly an issue play. But it doesn't pull its slaps either. Don't keep this one under your hat.

Inicholls@thejournal.canwest.com

© The Edmonton Journal 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.