

SEVEN DAYS [04.22.03]

Two for the Show

Theater Review: Don and Tom & Hollywood
BY DAVID WARNER

OK, let me just state first off that it feels a little *wrong* to praise a play that portrays psychotic killers as lovable crazies. But praise I must. Stephen Goldberg's *Don and Tom*, half of a double bill that just closed at City Hall following an earlier run at 135 Pearl, is laugh-out-loud funny and often startling in its brazenness -- especially when compared to the other play, Goldberg's *Hollywood*.

It's highly unlikely that two homicidal maniacs -- Don (Aaron Masi), who raped and murdered a little girl, and Tom (Paul J. Soychak), who killed his parents -- would wind up as death-row roomies. But writer-director Goldberg leaves no doubt from the start that we are in an absurd universe. If the killers are crazy, so are the over-the-top authority figures who lord it over them, including a cowboy-hat-wearing priest and Tom's abusive father -- both played with gusto by the versatile John D. Alexander.

Masi and Soychak are a cockeyed comic duo, a demented Mutt and Jeff in orange prison jumpsuits. With his dazed glare and bursts of chipmunkish energy, Soychak suggests a wilder Wally Cox. Masi is disarmingly funny whether complimenting his fellow murderer ("You look like a suffocation guy to me") or spinning loony fantasies of piloting a private airline where Hillary Clinton does in-flight lap dances for the crew. When the two finally receive their simultaneous lethal injections, it puts a whole new spin on good chemistry.

Does this speedy romp through patricide, rape, religion and capital punishment mean to suggest that our system of treating the criminally insane is itself a form of insanity? Maybe, but you don't have to get the message to enjoy the flight.

Hollywood, on the other hand, winds up getting grounded by the very clichés it mocks. This is ironic, because other than a pair of aggressively vapid TV entertainment-news hosts, the characters in *Hollywood* seem meant to be more "realistic" than those in *Don and Tom*, albeit real figures operating amidst the unrealities of the movie industry.

But if we accept the premise, we start to wonder about the particulars. If a character's supposed to be a once-famous actress, not to mention the wife of Hollywood's most successful movie mogul, how is it that just any schlub can interrupt her lunch and thrust a

screenplay at her? The schlub turns out to be a two-faced operator, so how is it he's such a babe-in-the-woods when it comes to rewrites and dealmaking? And are we really supposed to believe the mogul when he tells his wife he got Arthur Miller to write a screenplay for her? Head-scratchers like these keep interrupting our willingness to buy the plot's sometimes entertaining twists and turns.

If we do buy anything in *Holly-wood*, it's because of the actors, in particular Dennis McSorley as an unapologetic asshole of a producer. The play's most enjoyable scenes are those between McSorley and Peter Freyne as the private detective he hires to spy on his wife and the screenwriter. Not that these scenes are particularly credible, either, but for a while there's the pleasure of watching actors riffing off one another and reveling in the playwright's skill at off-kilter conversation -- a skill seen to much better effect in *Don and Tom*.