

Connecticut Critics Circle

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The Shark Is Broken – Review by Tom Holehan

Did you ever wonder what Richard Dreyfuss, Roy Scheider and Robert Shaw talked about when they were stuck between takes making “Jaws”, Steven Spielberg’s 1975 blockbuster that redefined summer movie-going for a generation? Well, you can eavesdrop on the conversation at Playhouse on Park where the recent Broadway play, “The Shark Is Broken”, is currently docked. The comedy opens the West Hartford theatre’s 16th season.

Written by Ian Shaw (son of Robert) and Joseph Nixon, “The Shark Is Broken” refers to the constant problems of working with “Bruce”, the mechanical shark from the popular film that caused endless delays and a ballooning budget. Stuck on set in the movie ship called “Orca”, the three actors drink, gamble, play cards and parry insults as they muse about a film they have no idea is about to make history. They also let their hair down when discussing their complicated relationships with their fathers, an issue they all seem to share.

For it to work, any production of “The Shark is Broken” must feature actors who are believable as those iconic stars of “Jaws”. At the Playhouse, director Joe Discher has done a good job in the casting of Jake Regensburg (Dreyfuss), Nicolas Greco (Scheider) and John D. Alexander (Shaw). The trio have a more than passing resemblance to the men and they all hit the right notes vocally most of the time. Regensburg nails Dreyfuss’ hyper personality and infectious giggle effortlessly while Greco’s calm and steady demeanor masks an uneasy impatience as he plays peacemaker of the group. Alexander is solid as Shaw, probably the most significant role in the play which is an obvious tribute to the man from his son. Alexander’s bluster and continual baiting of Dreyfuss gives the play much-needed energy and focus.

There’s some funny inside-Hollywood joking here and it definitely helps if you’ve seen the movie (is there anyone out there who hasn’t?), but you do wonder, by conclusion, what it all really means. When the three characters address their “daddy issues” late in the play, there’s a thought that this is what the playwright is exploring, but it eventually goes nowhere. In the end it becomes a play about three famous actors talking for over 100 minutes without intermission. Some of that talk is very engaging while some goes on far too long with banal observations. By its conclusion, many theatregoers may offer a collective shrug about the whole enterprise.

The chaotic scene design by Johann Fitzpatrick probably has more than it needs to depict the interior of the Orca, but I appreciated the addition of a pool of water downstage and a beautiful seascape as backdrop. Fitzpatrick also contributes an effective lighting design here with striking silhouettes between scenes and a storm sequence that shakes the rafters.

Maybe it’s not an important or significant addition to the theatrical canon, but “The Shark Is Broken” still entertains more often than not. No doubt many visitors to POP will enjoy this behind-the-scenes look at the making of an American classic.

(Available at <https://ctcritics.org/the-shark-is-broken-review-by-tom-holehan/>)