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Theater review: CT premiere of amusing male-bonding play ‘The Shark is Broken’ has bite

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John D. Alexander as Robert Shaw and Jake Regensburg as Richard Dreyfuss in “The Shark is Broken” at Playhouse on Park in West Hartford through Oct. 20. (Meredith Longo)

When you hear there is a play about the making of the 1975 Steven Spielberg blockbuster “Jaws,” in which the only characters are the movie’s stars Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss and Robert Shaw, you might expect one of two things. It’s likely to be either a wild frantic farce or a languid meditative musing on the tedium of making art.

“The Shark is Broken,” a London and Broadway hit making its Connecticut premiere at Playhouse on Park through Oct. 20, is a little of both but mostly its own very specific, highly detailed take on what went on behind the scenes of the movie.

One of the co-authors of the play is Ian Shaw, the son of Robert. Ian, who was 9 years old when his father died in 1978, played him onstage in the first several productions, including at the Edinburgh

Fringe Festival in Scotland, in London’s West End and last year for a limited engagement on Broadway. At Playhouse on Park, Robert Shaw is played by John D. Alexander, a New York actor and dialect coach who bears a striking resemblance to the English actor and also can talk like him. Alexander is joined by two other New York-based actors, Nicolas Greco as Scheider and Jake Regensburg as Dreyfuss.

Most of the play lives up to its title. Dreyfuss, Scheider and Shaw bond together, blow apart and try to get some alone time while waiting for technicians to fix the malfunctioning mechanical sharks that provide the movie’s thrills and chills.

This may be the most elaborate stage set in Playhouse on Park history, with a pool at the front of the performance filled with real water (though it doesn’t get used for anything) and a nicely cluttered boat that closely resembles the one from the movie. Scenic designer Johann Fitzpatrick also provides the atmospheric lighting.

Some scenes from “Jaws” are recreated as if they were being rehearsed or filmed. More cleverly, there are a lot of direct references, subtle or otherwise, in the movie that come out through the behind-the-scenes camaraderie of the play’s characters. The point is that waiting for a shark to attack isn’t that much different from waiting for a shark to work. Scheider, Dreyfuss and Shaw play cards, sing sea shanties and get drunk, very similarly to how Brody, Hooper and Quint do in the movie, in the same waterlogged location.

The difference is that in the movie these are amusing traits that humanize the heroes while the play shows some negative real-world consequences for some of the behavior. Shaw drinks so much that he can’t remember his lines. When he’s angry, he gets physical. Dreyfuss is shown to be insecure and annoying. His career is its ascendance, and he is getting vain and lofty about his prospects. He asks Shaw for Harold Pinter’s phone number. He talks incessantly about wanting to do Shakespeare — which he soon would, playing Iago in “Othello” for the New York Shakespeare Festival in Central Park.



Nicolas Greco as Roy Scheider and Jake Regensburg as Richard Dreyfuss about Johann Fitzpatrick's elaborate boat set in the Connecticut premiere of "The Shark is Broken" at Playhouse on Park. (Meredith Longo)

You easily acclimate to the sight of three contemporary actors playing film icons of the 1970s. A lot of "The Shark is Broken" is naturalistic, matter of fact, unfolding in real time. It starts feeling less real as the play starts to simplify these men into basic dramatic stereotypes. Shaw is the hard-drinking, arm-wrestling macho man. Dreyfuss is the foolish naif who is also pestering his wiser older co-star. Scheider is the peacemaker who can also stand apart from Shaw and Dreyfuss' squabble.

The back-and-forth makes for good, reliable comedy antics but it starts seeming less like biographical drama. Even the comedy routines are based on real-life occurrences like Dreyfuss throwing Shaw's bottle of bourbon overboard. It settles neatly into this triangle of pompous boor, jester and straight man then gets totally contrived by the end when the actors start to talk about the future of the film: It will be a hit but it will be forgotten. Fifty years from 1975, who will still care about it? Gee, do you think there will be a sequel? There are a lot of jokes like that, where the audience already knows the answers and that's the joke. So many "Jaws" factoids are dispensed that you could fill several nights of bar trivia games.

The comedy is obvious, the trivia is entertaining in small doses but the drama is unexpected. Shaw, Dreyfuss and Scheider all apparently had difficult relationships with their fathers. Shaw's alcoholism is sometimes

played for laughs but mostly is shown as pitiable.

Ultimately this is a very specific show about a very specific time in American film culture. The preshow music sets the scene with mainstream 1970s hits from "Rock On" to "You're So Vain" to, naturally, "Rock the Boat."

"The Shark is Broken" will almost certainly want to make you see "Jaws" again. Seeing the movie before the play, unless you've never seen it, might not work so well. "The Shark is Broken" has its own pace, its own stagebound splendor, its own interpretations of three recognizable movie stars and above all its own story to tell. It paddles from wild and wet to hot and dry, and it has got bite.

"The Shark is Broken" by Ian Shaw and Joseph Nixon, directed by Joe Discher, runs through Oct. 20 at Playhouse on Park, 244 Park Road, West Hartford. Performances are Tuesdays at 2 p.m., Wednesdays and Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 2 and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. \$42.50-\$55. playhouseonpark.org