

Review: “The Shark is Broken” at Playhouse on Park (Connecticut Critics Circle): F-bombs, foreshadowing, and a “tail” of overcoming differences

by Noel Teter

Ian Shaw and Joseph Nixon’s “The Shark is Broken” follows the journey of the three main actors in *Jaws* through the filming of the movie. Richard Dreyfuss is played by Jake Regensburg, Roy Scheider is played by Nicolas Greco, and Robert Shaw, the father of playwright Ian, is played by John D. Alexander. While the acting in the play is somewhat dry at times, “The Shark is Broken” proves an unexpectedly wholesome tale of three differently aged men overcoming copious amounts of interpersonal tension and technical difficulties to turn a silly film into a classic.

Each actor is portrayed as a somewhat quirky individual. Dreyfuss, the young man on set, is shown to be worldly, snobbish, and slightly fragile, masking his insecurities about his own ability. The portrayal is not flattering — just ask Dreyfuss himself, who has expressed his disdain for it publicly.

Shaw, meanwhile, is an alcoholic loose cannon, holding traditional views of toughness and masculinity. What Shaw and Dreyfuss have in common is their love for throwing f-bombs, often at each other. Scheider is the “normal” guy on set, often acting as Switzerland while Dreyfuss and Shaw exchange personal attacks. Even he can be eccentric, though; he is often made fun of for his nerdy observations and backlog of useless facts.

Regensburg, Greco, and Alexander do a fine job impersonating Dreyfuss, Scheider, and Shaw, respectively. Greco looks the part with his clean-shaven face, slicked-back hair, and thin glasses, while Regensburg nails Dreyfuss’ nasal delivery and snickering laugh. My only criticism of Regensburg’s performance is he seems to get so caught up in emulating Dreyfuss’ pouting demeanor that his acting becomes a bit robotic.

Alexander hurls curses with the British-accented growl of TV chef Gordon Ramsay and gives a sharp portrayal of drunkenness, as he stumbles, bumbles, and laughs wheezingly at Regensburg’s Dreyfuss like a schoolyard bully.

Eventually, each man is stripped down to the core of their vulnerability, stuck on a boat in the ocean while waiting for the film’s shark prop to be repaired. Their conversation turns unexpectedly to each cast member discussing their difficult relationships with their fathers, and two things become abundantly clear. First, Shaw’s alcoholism and false bravado come from his father and the long absence he left when he died in Shaw’s childhood. This is where Alexander’s acting shines through as the best in the play: his blustering, strong man exterior serves as an armor for the boy who went through his formative years without a father to guide him.

Second, Dreyfuss’ insecurity about his acting is borne from his father’s hesitance to support his becoming an actor. Regensburg’s Dreyfuss conceals this fear by parading around like a smug would-be star, and he doesn’t reveal his insecurity until he asks Scheider, “am I any good?” He then evokes true sympathy for the first time by having a panic attack on set, which forces him into a bit of humility and forces Alexander’s Shaw into fatherlike compassion, a side of each man previously unseen.

The play is rife with real-world foreshadowing: then-President Nixon is roasted for his unprecedented instability in an apparent shot at later-President Donald Trump; Regensburg’s Dreyfuss alludes to climate change by complaining about the changing weather; and the three men poke fun at the current movie landscape by ridiculing the idea of sequels and movies about dinosaurs.

The set design is quite attractive; Johann Fitzpatrick and Judi Manfre paint a realistic horizon above the sea behind a true-to-film bench inside the boat, while a half-moon-shaped pool in front of the deck reflects the aquatic setting of the play — and the entire scene — on crystal-clear water.

The play’s small cast and static scenery do not require a creatively intervening director. Joe Discher keeps scene transitions simple, if not a bit erratic, as some scenes are far shorter than others — let’s chalk that up to the script. Sound designer Sean McGinley leans into the play’s aquatic theme by choosing a kitchen sink collection of nautical instrumentals and sea shanties to play over the house speakers during scene adjustments, a string of songs that would be otherwise ill-matching.

If you walk into “The Shark is Broken” expecting a slapstick comedy of faulty props and film-acting bloopers, you’ll be surprised. The laughs are milder, and we never actually see a shark. Sit back and enjoy a play that is more about bonding through differences and navigating the questions and challenges of masculinity.

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