

Glenda Frank in New York

One of the mysteries of theatre is how a production that does so much right goes so wrong. Good play, good performances but the affect is flat, even vacuous, while sometimes another production which exhibits questionable directorial choices and has plot gaps you can drive a truck through is magical and alive.

So it is with *China Doll* by David Mamet at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre. The production is magical. *China Doll* is more a series of telephone monologues than a two-hander. Carson (Christopher Denham) speaks only when his boss Mickey Ross (Al Pacino) barks out a question. Ross, an aging member of the one percent who has no qualms about breaking the law, has fallen in love. He wants to marry and retire, but he has been targeted by international law agencies. His fiancée is in lockdown in Toronto threatened with charges and extradition. (Is she Chinese? Who knows? They met in Great Britain. This title is as curious as the title of Mamet's "Speed the Plow.")

Ross is continually brokering deals to free her, to renegotiate for his bespoke jet which is being held for tax evasion, and to flee the country. He threatens, begs, charms, bargains, cajoles, and comforts the various people on the other end of the line. And therein lies the total dazzle of the play. Ross is a David fighting several Goliaths. He arouses our admiration and frightens us. He is villain and hero in one, and he is desperate not to lose his last chance for happiness.

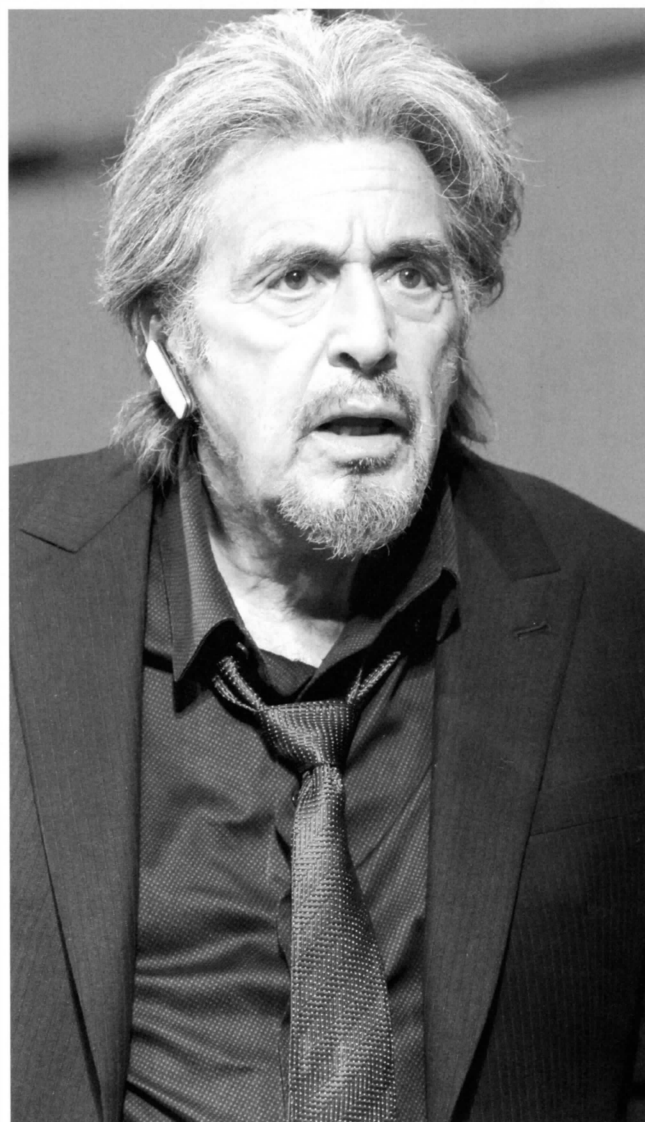
Al Pacino, whose emotional range rarely fails to impress, gives his all as Mickey — complete with the usual insightful performance and the familiar tics. Exasperated, Mickey initially comes to the conclusion that Carson is inept because he couldn't locate Mickey's fiancée in her hideaway hotel. But in fact Carson had located her under an alias and connects Mickey to her room. Abashed, the brusque billionaire apologizes without irony or subtext. Then he is all tenderness as he comforts the frightened woman. It

is extraordinarily moving, those flashes of gratitude, humility, and affection. We rarely know Mickey's next move or how Pacino will play it. The plot is sometimes confusing, sometimes improbable, sometimes badly underwritten, but the details don't really matter. It's a beautifully choreographed dance.

The set for *China Doll* (by Derek McLane), an attractive upscale apartment on a large stage, dwarfs Pacino, adding to the sense of Mickey's isolation and providing a counterpoint to his indomitable scrappiness. What doesn't work is the blocking by director Pam MacKinnon (Tony Award for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*). Both Pacino and Christopher Denham (*The Lieutenant of Inishmore*) found the playwright's rhythms, but Denham never discovered who Carson is so that the metamorphosis he undergoes becomes disruptive and unbelievable. Mamet is a language-driven artist, a rarity today. In *Writing in Restaurants* (1986), Mamet, who has also been a director and an actor, wrote that he doesn't privilege the inner life of the character. "The actor brings to the stage desire rather than completion, will rather than emotion. His performance will be compared not to art, but to life." In Mamet's world, conflict is king.

I look forward to revivals of *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). Each one has me humming the music by Jerry Bock, singing the lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, or playing over a scene from the book by Joseph Stein. Tevye, the milkman from Anatevka, suffers from our everyday problems — money issues, children with their own ideas, a difficult spouse — and worse, pogroms and eventual exile. He has comically irreverent, sometimes fist-shaking negotiations with God. Tevye's famous and endearing reasoning involves two signature phrases: "on the one hand," which is soon followed by "on the other hand."

Most revivals are good, but few are compelling. Danny Burstein, an admired Broadway veteran (five Tony nominations), is



Al Pacino in *China Doll*. Photo: Jeremy Daniel.

curiously stolid in the current revival directed by Bartlett Sher (*The King and I*) at the Broadway Theatre. Great singing and acting, but there's a self-consciousness that banks his inner fire. Jessica Hecht (*Harvey*), fortunately, totally inhabits the role of Golde, his careworn wife. She brings a more modern spin to a wife juggling multiple responsibilities with scant resources.

Tevya's five daughters choose different paths. The lovely Tzeitel (Alexandra Silber), who stands up to her father in choosing Motel (Adam Kantor) the poor tailor over Lazar Wolf (Adam Dannheisser) the wealthy but aging butcher, receives the most attention. The bookish daughter's selection is

usually just one of the stories, but in this production, perhaps because of Melanie Moore's charismatic performance as her daughter, her choice of Fyedka (Nick Rehberger), a Christian, makes sense and is still heartbreaking, especially when Tevye pulls a scrim across the stage, cutting her off from the family. Alix Korey brings assured comic timing to the role of the aging matchmaker Yente but really hits her stride with her farewell, melding resilience with poignant despair as she shares her plans to move to Jerusalem and continue her craft. For me, her few lines — rather than the final metaphorical parade of refugees — capture the terror of expulsion.



Jessica Hecht and Alix Korey in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Photo: Joan Marcus.

The original choreography by Jerome Robbins, who is credited as one of the show's co-creators, is usually sacrosanct. The new athletic choreography by the Israeli-born Hofesh Shechter (who heads a dance company in London), however, embodies the theme of the musical: tradition and change. While paying homage to Robbins' in the show-stopping bottle dance at Tzeitel and Motel's wedding, Schechter's choreography explodes with loose-limbed movement. In the opening number when we meet the papas, the mamas, the sons, and the daughters, each group and each individual has a distinct choreography. In the barroom celebration of Tzeitel and Lasar's engagement, the seemingly spontaneous movements signal the community's joy.

Tevye's fantastic story about omens and ghosts used to convince his wife to bless the marriage of Tzeitel and Motel inspired some wonderful surrealistic touches. Haunting

figures on stilts, a masked chorus, and the sudden plunge of Lazar's giant deceased wife into the room evoking comic terror.

Alliance at the Longacre Theatre should have been better. The subject matter is explosive and unusual for a musical: the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. The production suffers from a highly competent blandness, stretching from the primary love relationships to the conflict between two men, one of whom enlists to prove that loyalty is not a matter of heritage and the other who protests and is jailed. George Takai (Mr. Sulu from *Star Trek*), who experienced the camps as a child, is double cast as an interned grandfather and the aging avatar of the man who enlisted. He brings to his role a charismatic radiance and energy that easily crosses the footlights. Lea Salonga (brilliant in *Miss Saigon*) needs a meatier role. Arguing, dancing, or singing, Katie Rose Clarke as

Hannah Campbell, the nurse who risks her career, and Telly Leung as Sammy, her sexy Japanese love, create the most moving moments.

The *Woodsmen*, off Broadway at New World Stages, is a prequel to *The Wizard of Oz*. Imagine *War Horse* crossed with *Into the Woods* on a small scale. It is helmed by the multitalented James Ortiz, author of the script and designer of the puppets integral to the show, and is directed by Claire Karpen. The life-size puppets (a witch, the Tin Man, crows, a few monsters) are manipulated by on-stage performers and seem alive, just like the woods (performers hold branches that try to trap, even attack, the characters). Catherine Clark and Jamie Roderick did the mood-evoking lighting and the unique, eclectic score is by Edward W. Hardy.

Glenda Frank can be contacted at playsinternational@theater-research-institute.eu

WHAT'S ON BROADWAY

Aladdin, New Amsterdam;
American Psycho, Schoenfeld;
An American in Paris, Palace;
 Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, Walter Kerr;
Beautiful - the Carole King Musical, Stephen Sondheim;
Blackbird, Belasco;
The Book of Mormon, Eugene O'Neill;
Bright Star, Cort;
Chicago the Musical, Ambassador;
Cirque du Soleil, Paramour, Lyric;
The Color Purple, Bernard B. Jacobs;
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime, Barrymore;
Disaster, Nederlander;
Eclipsed, John Golden;
Eugene O'Neill's Hughie, Booth;
The Father, Samuel J. Friedman;
Fiddler on the Roof, Broadway;
Finding Neverland, Lunt-Fontanne;
Fully Committed, Lyceum;
Fun Home, Circle in the Square;
Hamilton, Richard Rodgers;
The Humans, Helen Hayes;
Jersey Boys, August Wilson;
The King and I, Vivian Beaumont;
Kinky Boots, Al Hirschfeld;
Les Misérables, Imperial;
The Lion King, Minskoff;
Long Day's Journey into Night, American Airlines;
Matilda the Musical, Shubert;
Nerds, Longacre;
On Your Feet, Marquis;
The Phantom of the Opera, Majestic;
School of Rock, Winter Garden;
She Loves Me, Studio 54;
Shuffle Along, Music Box;
Something Rotten, St. James;
Tuck Everlasting, Broadhurst;
Waitress, Brooks Atkinson;
Wicked, Gershwin.