

"Moonlight & Magnolias"

www.rubynancy.com – April 2008 - by Ruby Nancy

MOONLIGHT & MAGNOLIAS takes its title from a phrase used twice in the script, referring to the setting for at least part of Margaret Mitchell's "Gone With the Wind." Not necessarily meant as a compliment, it is a poke at the romanticization of the pre-Civil War South, and implies the haze of soft lighting and floral scents.

The setting for the play it names, however, is very different. MOONLIGHT & MAGNOLIAS takes place in the office of David O. Selznick, who has begun his work as producer of the film version of Mitchell's bestseller. Selznick (played with impassioned panache by Jason Platt) has locked screenplay "fixer" Ben Hecht and director Victor Fleming in his office suite until they can hammer out a new screenplay for "Gone With the Wind" – which shut down after three weeks of filming because Selznick wasn't happy with the screenplay he had. After a couple of days of crazed round-the-clock work and nothing to eat but bananas and peanuts, the place has been totally trashed; and a little soft light and fresh flowers would be a vast improvement.

Luckily for us, Platt and his costars can work just fine in the middle of all the mess. (And, as the storyline goes, luckily for the eventual audiences of the film, so can the characters they play.) Platt is joined by Don Faust, who plays Hecht, and Chris White, as Fleming – and occasionally by Ryan Mosher-Ohr, who plays Selznick's secretary, Miss Poppengul – and this team of performers turn out a first-rate show.

It's not quite the laugh-aloud comedy I was expecting, but this material is deeply, and more subtly, funny than I would have even thought possible. MOONLIGHT & MAGNOLIAS is something of a tribute to the movies in general, and to "Gone With the Wind" in particular – and folks most familiar with the film (or at least the novel) are most likely to enjoy this work. This is a script crammed with gems for character actors, too, and anyone who enjoys seeing very good performances of great roles will love this play, too.

Platt is an energetic performer who dominates many scenes with his outsized character, but it is Platt's absolute believability in the role that is most impressive. His fervor *becomes* Selznick's, and the result is an amazingly authentic portrayal. I especially enjoyed his observations about the film industry's past and present. Platt lets us see the character's desperation, and his ability to let us clearly see Selznick channel a variety of characters from the novel is sheer genius and uproariously funny (but I won't spoil your fun by telling you who all he provides line readings for!). This is top-of-the-line work by a fabulous actor.

Faust holds his own as the screenplay doctor, giving poor Hecht a theatrical whine that is really funny, yet imbuing the character's political stances with real feeling. (My favorite whimper of Faust's Hecht relates to body functions, so I won't spoil that laugh either.) Suffice it to say that this role offers plenty of laughs as well.

White plays the cardboard posturing of Fleming with just the right touch of cartoon-influenced swagger, and he gets some big laughs for this, but it is the facial expressions and physical antics of an exhausted, punch-drunk Fleming that are the biggest crowd-pleasers here. Favorites include his eventual discovery of the very last banana, plus a handful of characters from "Gone With the Wind," but White is also believable as the successful director who has vowed to never be a chauffeur again.

Mosher-Ohr is also funny, giving new meaning to the term "put-upon," but it is the sum total of these performances that make this such a great show. Very funny and sometimes moving as well, this is a work that director (and tech director and set designer) Jennifer Kingry can be deservedly proud of.

A creative (and doubtless embellished) look at actual events that transpired as part of the making of a film classic, MOONLIGHT & MAGNOLIAS is entertaining in its own right. Don't miss the chance to see this excellent show.

Richmond Hill offers laughs for peanuts

Dispatch-/Argus – April 11, 2008 - by Julie Jensen

The Richmond Hill Players' production of "Moonlight & Magnolias" is true slapstick comedy -- with the emphasis on "slap."

The three male actors who are onstage continuously clobber each other with resounding smacks, and surely must reach for the liniment bottle after a performance. This is a tremendously physical show.

Director Jennifer Kingry keeps things moving from start to finish. She has a special feeling for this story because she was a Directors Guild trainee at the former MGM studios in Hollywood.

Why does that make a difference? The play is about David O. Selznick, the MGM producer who bought the rights to Margaret Mitchell's novel "Gone With the Wind"; fired the team that started to make the movie; and brought in scriptwriter Ben Hecht and director Victor Fleming to get the film off the ground.

They are locked in Selznick's office for five days and nights, subsisting on peanuts in the shell and bananas while Hecht, who has not read the book, sits at the typewriter and taps out what he sees Selznick and Fleming performing in the growing litter.

Jason Platt's Selznick resembles the Energizer Bunny. He leaps, gestures wildly, and mugs as he acts out what goes on in the Margaret Mitchell story.

Don Faust plays Ben Hecht, who with a weary determination takes on the impossible task of writing the script when he hasn't read the book. He falls asleep at the keyboard from time to time.

Chris White is Fleming, the director, always checking camera angles, and sometimes scudding across the floor on his knees or struggling to peel a banana.

Ryan Mosher-Orr plays Miss Poppengul, Selznick's secretary. Her lines are mostly "Yes, Mr. Selznick" or "No, Mr. Selznick" as she takes notes.

Hecht worries about the racism of Scarlett O'Hara slapping Prissy the slave girl. The movie was made on the eve of World War II, and the commentary about Jews is ironic.

The litter piles up through two acts -- peanut shells and crumpled paper. The men become more and more disheveled, as does Miss Poppengul.

There's a big set-to about Rhett Butler saying, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn!" and an argument about how the story ends.

Finally, Miss Poppengul, silhouetted against the sunset through the office window, becomes Scarlett O'Hara, saying, "Tomorrow is another day," and film history is about to be made.

Moonlight & Magnolias' don't really mix that well

Quad-City Times – April 11, 2008 - by David Burke

This must be the year for Richmond Hill Players to go behind the scenes.

The Geneseo, Ill.-based troupe is following its backstage theater play from February, "Light Up the Sky," with "Moonlight & Magnolias," a comedy-dramatization of the efforts by the producer, a writer and a director to salvage "Gone With the Wind."

Despite gallant performances from each of its three male leads, Ron Hutchinson's script shifts back and forth too often between screwball comedy and "message piece."

To the credit of director Jennifer Kingry, the three men she cast in the real-life roles of producer David O. Selznick (Jason Platt), script doctor Ben Hecht (Don Faust) and director Victor Fleming (Chris White) look the parts. Online searches show that there is some visual similarity.

In this play — just as it supposedly happened in real life — Selznick calls in Hecht to rewrite the script and takes Fleming off “The Wizard of Oz” set to direct “Gone With the Wind,” which has all the appearances of a box office bomb.

The trouble? Hecht has read only one page of Margaret Mitchell’s novel and there’s a five-day deadline to get the script ready to go.

So, Platt’s Selznick and White’s Fleming end up acting out a good deal of the book while Faust’s Hecht turns it into a screenplay.

The comedic elements are there: The three sustain themselves on a combination of peanuts and bananas, and they turn loopy and punch-drunk after days and days of their marathon writing session. To see rugged guys such as Platt and White turn themselves into Scarlett and Prissy is a funny idea in itself.

“Moonlight” follows them through disagreements with each other and the eventual collaboration that became one of the all-time classic movies.

But the show also wants to deliver a message about anti-Semitism and the opinion of Jewish people in the movie industry during the 1930s. Hecht is adamant that Selznick take more of a stand for Jewish people while the producer argues that the system can’t be fought.

There are a couple of monologues about the Importance of Movies, including Selznick’s on how he’s making his films for the regular Joes and Janes in the crowd.

There’s also a little bit of foreshadowing about the future of Hollywood. At one point, both director and writer argue about Mitchell’s downer of an ending to the book and try to make their case for filming an additional conclusion and “letting the audience decide.”

It’s a reminder that too many movies these days throw their decisions to focus groups and test audiences rather than letting the creative minds be creative.

Platt has the right balance of executive demeanor, vulnerability and a bit of whimsy as Selznick.

White solidifies his reputation as one of the most versatile actors in the Quad-City region as man’s man Fleming.

And Faust balances his character’s exhaustion and crusading aspects as the movie ghostwriter.

Adding femininity to the trio is Ryan Mosher-Orr as Platt’s secretary, who makes the comedic most out of lines that are generally “Yes, Mr. Selznick” and “No, Mr. Selznick.”

Maybe if I were a bigger “Gone With the Wind” fan, I’d enjoy “Moonlight & Magnolias” more.

As it is, it’s got a few prime screwball comedy elements and several dramatic bits that, frankly, don’t mix well.

Uncivil War: "Moonlight & Magnolias,"

River Cities Reader – April 9, 2008 - by Mike Schulz

It doesn't happen often, thank heavens. But I occasionally leave a theatrical production less disappointed than pissed off, as I'm occasionally forced into watching talented people dedicate their energies to a show that's clearly beneath them. Such is the case, sadly, with the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's *Moonlight & Magnolias*, playwright Ron Hutchinson's comedy about the (imagined) farcical re-writing of the *Gone with the Wind* screenplay, and a work so confused and offensive that it all but completely nullifies the enthusiasm with which it's being produced.

Richmond Hill's latest is directed by Jennifer Kingry, who also serves as technical director, set designer, and (with Jean Melillo) co-costume designer, and if she'd been given a crack at re-writing the script, too, the results would no doubt have been far more entertaining. *Moonlight & Magnolias* opens with *Gone with the Wind* producer David O. Selznick (Jason Platt) begging dialogue whiz Ben Hecht (Don Faust) to re-tool his thus far unworkable dream project, and

coercing director Victor Fleming (Chris White) into taking the reins from the recently fired George Cukor; Selznick's (or rather Hutchinson's) idea is that by locking the three of them in his office for five days, and feasting on a steady diet of bananas and peanuts, they'll eventually churn out a masterpiece.

Where to begin in describing how irredeemably awful this setup is? Forget, for a minute, that Selznick's plan makes the mogul appear almost criminally deranged, and that the seemingly level-headed Hecht and Fleming look like half-witted patsies for complying; *Moonlight & Magnolias* is a farce, so we go with it. But from minute one, Hutchinson displays such blatant disregard, and even contempt, for both *Gone with the Wind* and the artistic process itself that I detested the show long before it devolved into *The Three Stooges Go to Atlanta*. (This is clearly a minority opinion, as Thursday's opening-night audience, bless their hearts, gave the production a standing ovation.)

As presented here, Hecht has not only never read *Gone with the Wind*, but seems never to have heard of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler (in 1939!), and consequently, much of the play is dedicated to Selznick and Fleming explaining or enacting the book's plot to the screenwriter, who rolls his eyes and makes snarky comments about the ludicrousness of it all. (Selznick agrees that it's swill, but keeps reminding Hecht that it's *hugely popular* swill.) Yet you don't have to be a fan of the source material - I haven't read it - to be put off by Hutchinson's hatefulness toward Margaret Mitchell's creation.

We're continually told of *Gone with the Wind*'s convoluted plotting, its lousy dialogue, its melodramatic characters, its unsatisfying ending - *Moonlight & Magnolias*' playwright isn't merely derisive toward the work, but toward the millions of suckers who fell for it. (Hutchinson is also a Hollywood screenwriter, and those who co-scripted 1996's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* should *not* cast stones.) And how are we to take the notion that Selznick, Hecht, and Fleming - reduced, after five days trapped together, to sweaty, punchy wrecks - save this supposedly wretched material by condensing the Southern pulp into a more manageable form? What Hutchinson is doing here is really low; he's dismissive of Mitchell yet suggests that the film's eventual artistic and financial success stemmed directly *from* Mitchell, as it merely took a trio of sleep-deprived oafs to save the good stuff and toss out the rest. (Throw a monkey a banana and watch him type.)

Space is running short, so let me just sketch out a few of the script's other irritants: the glaringly anachronistic dialogue ("Suck it up," "You must have mistaken me for someone who gives a crap"); the borderline sexism and racism - oftentimes in the same breath - of the *Gone with the Wind* "re-creations" (Butterfly McQueen should sue from the grave); the maudlin, unconvincing attempts at Real Emotion (Selznick and Hecht frequently interrupt the wackiness with didactic diatribes on the pressures of being a Jew in Hollywood).

No actors could make sense of these senseless proceedings, but as God as my witness, the cast gives it a good shot. Platt, who may be incapable of falseness on stage, attacks his role with ferocious focus and determination, Faust grows more enjoyable as Hecht grows more harried, and White, to his enormous credit, is believable as both a macho jerk - he rationalizes smacking young Judy Garland by saying he did it "just *once*" - and the whining mess that Hutchinson's plotting forces him to become. (The play's standout portrayal, though, is given by that divine comedienne Ryan Mosher-Ohr, mostly because she has the fewest number of humiliating routines; with her secretary given little to do besides deliver variations on "Yes, Mr. Selznick," the performer's gradually ruffled deadpan is blissfully funny.) Richmond Hill's production isn't without scattered laughs, yet when they do come it's *despite* the material, not because of it; *Moonlight & Magnolias*' actors are working overtime here, and unfortunately, they're stuck with a script that's nothing but Tara bull.