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MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

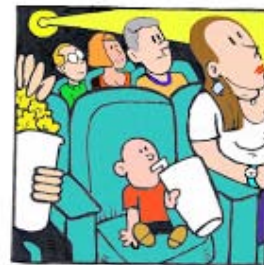
THEATER: BERNHARDT! HAMLET! MCTEER! AND TEARS!

BERNHARDT/HAMLET * 1/2 out of ******AMERICAN AIRLINES THEATRE AT ROUNABOUT
THEATRE COMPANY**

The danger of quoting a masterpiece in your play is of course that the audience will find the rest of the work wanting in comparison. Theresa Rebeck's new play doesn't face that problem for the uncomfortable reason that you spend the entire night trying to figure out exactly what story she's trying to tell. At first, it seems like a bracing reminder of how women have struggled against artificial restraints for far too long. At the turn of the 20th century, men playing women on stage was perfectly natural. But when the Divine Sarah Bernhardt, the greatest actress of her age -- played here by Janet McTeer, who is certainly one of the greatest in ours -- wants to play a man, why it's a travesty!

Then *Bernhardt/Hamlet* lingers on the romance between this legend and the playwright Edmond Rostand (Jason Butler Harner); maybe this light drama is about the tug of war between artistic impulse and personal happiness? (Personal responsibility has nothing to do with it, not when we're talking about artists.) Or perhaps it's a valentine to acting? And yet, the few scenes with a little warmth and spark are the too-brief moments between Bernhardt and her son Maurice (a sweet Nick Westrate), who is home from college to chide her behavior...and perhaps borrow a little money.

In other words, *Bernhardt/Hamlet* does a lot of things poorly and none of the technical elements overseen by director Moritz von Stuelpnagel or the probably fine cast lorded over (in the nicest way) by McTeer can do anything about it. I say probably fine, because with weak material, who can tell?



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It's 1897 and the world famous and famously scandalous actress Sarah Bernhardt is flat broke right after launching her own company and buying a cavernous new theater. A commercial flop has Bernhardt flailing but instead of wheeling out her cash cow of a vehicle "Camille," she makes the bold, unheard-of decision to star in *Hamlet*. Her lover Edmond is worried. Critics snipe even before seeing it. Rehearsals are strained. My gosh, even the dependable genius Alphonse -- who usually turns out one iconic Art Nouveau masterpiece after another for Bernhardt -- is uninspired when asked to cook up a poster to promote the show. What's it about, he wonders? What is its essence? One might ask the same here.

None of the show's many threads are satisfyingly tied together. The second act perks up a bit -- at least Bernhardt and Rostand fight a little. But it becomes bewildering when we suddenly watch a scene from *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Wait, what show's genesis are we following here? It doesn't help that a miscast Dylan Baker is not the grand sort of actor who would seize the showy role of Cyrano and run with it. Even more confusing is a final flourish in the show that bows to cinema, which captured Bernhardt in some silent footage late in her life. That leaves this ode to live theater thoroughly discombobulated at the end.

Far better to remember a scene in Act One. Bernhardt and fellow actor Constant Coquelin (Baker) are rehearsing a scene from *Hamlet*, trying to make it speak to the actress so she can bring the Dane to life. They're tackling a moment between Hamlet and the ghost of his father. Why, she wonders, is Hamlet's father wearing armor when talking to his son? Constant offhandedly says he's done the lead role four times and never asked himself that question. They speak the lines and find a pulse, a quiet moving pulse that brings it alive for them and allows Bernhardt to link Hamlet's missing connection with his father to her own complicated familial history. (She's the daughter of a courtesan and has no idea who her real father might be.)

The audience doesn't need to know this detail of her life; the scene just

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works. After all, we're watching two actors tackle a scene by Shakespeare. But full credit to Rebeck; here she's made like Stoppard and used the Bard to bring alive two characters and the enchanting world of rehearsal. It doesn't happen often enough but for a moment at least it surely does.

NOTE: For a far more satisfying look at the life of Bernhardt, check out the new dual biography "Playing To The Gods: Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse and the Rivalry That Changed Acting Forever" by Peter Rader. [You can find my full review for Broadway Direct here.](#)

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