



TUESDAY, APRIL 30, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: "INK" STAINED WRETCHES GET THEIR DUE

**INK** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT THE SAMUEL J FRIEDMAN THEATRE**

Jonny Lee Miller was robbed. The new play *Ink* received a very strong six Tony nominations this week including Best Play, Best Director and Best Supporting Actor for Bertie Carvel's turn as Rupert Murdoch. But Miller anchors this show as the ink-stained wretch Larry Lamb, the newsman who partnered with Murdoch to turn the British tabloid *The Sun* into a newspaper with the lowest common denominator in terms of smarts and the highest circulation. FOX News, much? Miller broke out with the film *Trainspotting* and has enjoyed a string of well-reviewed roles in the UK. I've mostly seen him grow tremendously as an actor on shows like *Dexter* (a great season long arc), the charming *Eli Stone* and his excellent work as Sherlock Holmes on the satisfying CBS series *Elementary*. But he does his best work here, making this good-not-great drama well worth seeing.

For an ink-stained wretch like myself, the topic is fascinating. A young Murdoch (Carvel) sees there is money to be made in the newspaper biz. Fleet Street is crowded with competitors in 1969 but they're all offering the same product: news that condescends to its blue collar readers. Carvel convinces Lamb to take over the moribund *Sun* despite the very long odds: they'll be stuck with a chunk of employees (the ones no one else wants), the competition is fierce and the clubby world of London journalism isn't about to make it easy for the likes of an Aussie upstart like Murdoch.

Well, they never made it easy for the Yorkshire man Lamb, did they? His background is decidedly working class, surely one big reason he's proven himself in London but been relegated to a backwater posting. Murdoch promises Lamb a free hand as long as the editor pursues the mass audience Murdoch wants to reach. Lamb recruits a Bad News



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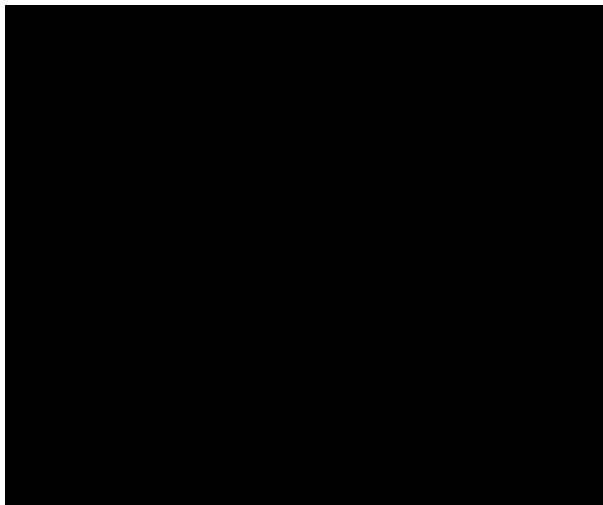
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Bears of a staff, misfits one and all but folk with nothing to lose or a desire to upend convention. Their sports guy can't spell and gets players mixed up at times, but he can write copy like two lads chatting at their local, not some stuffy toff weighing in on cricket. The woman in charge of the "girls" news knows women want to talk about sex. The photographer (seemingly camp or just completely ditzzy) doesn't blink an eye over increasingly outlandish stunts like girls in skimpy outfits posing outside Number 10, Downing Street.

It's all such seductive fun, including a brain-storming session in which the staff shares the stories they really care about, like the weather, free stuff and yes sex. We know where it's headed -- gossip as news, a relentless dumbing down of the stories that actually do matter and in inability to actually tell the difference. But the stories they discuss doing are fun and the stuffed shirt harrumphing over their tactics so tiresome you can't help rooting for The Sun to become the biggest newspaper in the land.

Then it all falls apart. Oh, not financially. Sex sells, after all. But the stories hit closer to home and Lamb sells his soul to push the paper over the finish line in terms of circulation. No, even he can't justify nudie photos (the now iconic Page Three girl) as anything other than The End Of Journalism. But it was almost fun while it lasted.



This story plays out on a marvelous Tony-nominated set by Bunny Christie (who also did the costumes). Desks are piled on top of one another all the way to the sky, with actors clambering up and down throughout the show. And it's engagingly performed, with director Rupert Goold (also a Tony nominee) eliciting strong characterizations from a solid cast.

It's the script by James Graham that falters in the end. He does a good job of setting up the battle between the upstarts writing fun stories versus the boring status quo. Silly weekly contests and naughty stunts get their due. It's the downfall where Graham falters. First comes the inadvertent kidnapping of the wife of a top executive in Murdoch's

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THEATER: THE PAIN OF "THE  
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THEATER: LESS IS MORE AT  
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organization. The kidnappers wanted Murdoch's wife but messed up. Lamb sees a massive story and wouldn't they cover it if it were anyone else? He calls Murdoch a hypocrite for being fun with such coverage until it comes to one of their own. Again and again Lamb pushes the envelope: printing the kidnapper's retort, a message from the kidnapped wife and on and on. Murdoch objects. The staff objects. Even the workers printing up the issue object. But Lamb won't be stopped.

This works fine but it's followed by the introduction of nude photos to the paper, the tits and ass of a Page Three girl. While more time is spent on the agonizing kidnapping story, the scenes on doing a nude photo feel drawn out and laborious. Even if turning a newspaper into little more than Playboy was the final straw, it can't compare to the life and death stakes that preceded it. The debate is dull, the embarrassment of Lamb played oh so seriously rather than perhaps mockingly as it might (the nerve of him) and well it just can't help seeming a whole lot of nothing. Mind you, newspapers still don't usually traffic in erotica, so yes, it was a remarkably crass tactic. But of course it worked.

And the coda is worse, offering the usual hints about the future with Murdoch saying Lamb has taught him the importance of television and he's headed over to America.... Yes, yes, we know what comes next. No need for any coyness, thank you very much. But the murky plotting towards the end doesn't stop *Ink* from being a fun and involving show with a very good cast, led by Carvel and most especially Jonny Lee Miller.

## **THEATER OF 2019**

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[Minor Character: Under The Radar Festival at the Public](#) \*\*\*

[Ink: Under The Radar Festival at the Public](#) \*\* 1/2

[Choir Boy](#) \*\* 1/2

[White Noise](#) \*\* 1/2

[Kiss Me, Kate](#) \*\*\*

[Ain't No Mo'](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[Ain't Too Proud](#) \*\*

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[Tootsie](#) \*\* 1/2

[Ink](#) \*\*\*

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POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 6:11 PM 

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