



Theater: No Lie, David Ives Is Funny; Jubilant "Jitney"



Michael Giltz, ContributorBookFilter creator

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THE LIAR \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

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CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

This is NOT the third in a trilogy. True, playwright David Ives has delivered two earlier, brilliant new English-language versions of classic French comedy for Classic Stage Company — *The Heir Apparent* and *The School For Lies*. The only thing unfelicitous about them is how Ives teasingly refers to them as “translaptations” — as much adaption as translation. It’s also true that this is the third such play, two plus one being three and three being a trilogy. And so yes, in a way, it must be admitted that this *is* a trilogy. But if it is I must insist it be a trilogy in the same way that *The Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy* was a trilogy, for Douglas Adams wrote six of those before death — and only death — prevented him from extending his trilogy to seven or eight or more.

If you’ve never heard of *Le menteur* by Pierre Corneille, never fear — neither had Ives until he was asked to take a stab at adapting it into English. He was delighted by the play...and then tore it apart before building it back up again. What remains is a comedy in verse, filled with buoyant plotting, relentless wordplay and just enough gravitas to make it matter. Add in an excellent ensemble, gorgeous costumes, an elegantly simple set and invisible direction by Michael Kahn and you’ve got yourself a very satisfying evening of theater. No lie.

Here’s the plot, so buckle in. Our hero is Dorante (Christian Conn), a dashing young man who is new to Paris and has a gift for lying. He’d rather lie than tell the truth, to tell the truth. His manservant Cliton (the always winning Carson Elrod) is cursed with the opposite talent: he must tell the truth, even when he’d rather lie. (“Do these pants make me look fat?” Argh!) The rogue falls for the lovely Clarice (Ismenia Mendes) but understandably confuses her name with the woman’s best friend Lucrece (Amelia Pedlow),

creating all sorts of confusion. Clarice, meanwhile, is secretly engaged to Alcippe (Tony Roach), but he proves incapable of getting permission from his father. His best friend is Philiste (Aubrey Deeker) who is secretly in love with the severe maidservant Sabine, whose identical twin sister Isabelle is as lewd as Sabine is a prude. Confused? Good!



**Photo Credit: Richard Termine**

It's all stuff and nonsense, thank God, and beautifully presented. Alexander Dodge offers a set of unerring directness: a beautiful tiled floor, two benches and — when need be — a painting and a chandelier to drop from the heavens and indicate an interior. That's it. In contrast, the costumes of Murell Horton are gorgeously detailed and all of it feels sumptuous in the intimate space of CSC thanks to the lighting (Mary Louise Geiger), original music (Adam Wernick) and other technical details.

A solid first act becomes a terrific second act. Elrod is a delight throughout as the truth-telling master-of-ceremonies Cliton. Kelly Hutchinson practically steals the show as the twin maids Isabelle and Sabine. (It seems almost foolproof as written by Ives but she certainly nails it.) While in the first act the two female leads have little to do, they become fully active and fleshed out in the second act. Similarly, Philiste is given more motivation, Alcippe becomes more human and not just a dim bulb to make fun of and Dorante gets tied up in his lies to a satisfying degree. Pedlow in particular is allowed a genuinely moving scene when she feels toyed with.

And the irreplaceable Adam LeFevre is a treat as Geronte, the father of Dorante. At first a foolish figure, he lends such drama and seriousness to a second act scene when remonstrating his son that the entire evening is elevated all at once. Perhaps Conn will eventually be able to mine his final moral dilemma into something just as moving since, for the moment, it merely glides by. All four young leads (Conn, Roach, Pedlow and Mendes) were new to me and left me thoroughly impressed — the sort of turns that have you reaching for your Playbill to see what they've done before. And who doesn't love an evening of comedy that glides by on laughter? I can't wait for the next three or four additions to this impressive trilogy of shows.

JITNEY \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

## MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE

What a treat to finally see *Jitney* on Broadway. But what a treat to see any August Wilson play anytime, anywhere. I've seen them on Broadway and Off, in repertory (almost) at Signature Theatre, in New Jersey, at Second Stage (where I saw *Jitney* in 2000, my first chance to savor Wilson), on film and even during the recording of radio adaptations at WNYC for public radio. When you see an August Wilson play, you're going to hear hilarious dialogue, meet vivid characters, discover heart-rending monologues, enjoy tense drama and feel the sweep of American history.

*Jitney* is of course the first play in Wilson's majestic Century Cycle, a ten play survey of the 20th century worthy of comparison to Shakespeare's History Plays. He wrote one play set in each decade and *Jitney* was the first. Ironically for a playwright who enjoyed almost unprecedented critical success on Broadway, this is also the last to make it to the Great White Way. (Insert caustic comment here.) None of Wilson's plays are perfect and *Jitney* is no exception. Wilson didn't strive for a perfect, jewel-like clarity. He was about sprawl and humanity; his plays are bursting at the seams with enough memorable people and plot to fill up four or five plays by anyone else. It's a large canvas he's working on and to me, Wilson's voice is fully formed right here at the start.

Set in the 1970s in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, *Jitney* takes place in the office of a car service company. Each person we see has a backstory worth plumbing, whether it's the sad old drunk (Anthony Chisholm) who stops you in your tracks with his monologue about how he once tailored suits for singer Billy Eckstine or Youngblood (André Holland), the young man who is doing everything he can to save up enough money to buy a home for he and his girlfriend Rena (Cara Patterson). Among the many other dramas, the owner of this gypsy cab company is Becker (John Douglas Thompson), whose son Booster (Brandon J. Dirden) is being released from prison after serving 20 years for murdering his girlfriend. Their confrontation at the end of act one is so good that the rest of the play almost can't help but feel like a denouement — an exceptionally rich denouement, but one nonetheless.

This is a strong ensemble in the capable hands of director Ruben Santiago-Hudson, a keeper of the flame for Wilson. I didn't care for one flourish that freeze-framed the action in the second act but it didn't hurt things to any degree. In the cast, only Patterson is perhaps a little weak as the girlfriend, acting as much with her hands as her heart. Happily, the wonderful Holland as Youngblood is so good he lifts her up and you accept their romance. Actor Stephen McKinley Henderson was so brilliant as Turnbo when I first saw the play in 2000 that I still quote some of his line readings and feared for anyone following in his footsteps. But lo and behold, Michael Potts puts his own distinctive stamp on the part, turning Turnbo from an annoying busybody to more of an Iago, ready to poison the lives of others just because he can.

Every technical element is strong, though David Gallo's detailed, lived-in set is surely a highlight. Somehow, I foolishly worried about the brilliant John Douglas Thompson. He was terrific as jazzman Louis Armstrong in *Satchmo At The Waldorf*. Still, I'd grown so accustomed to his towering presence in the classics that I wondered if he would work in the milieu of Wilson's world. Ha! He is tremendous of course. For all I know the man can sing and dance and do comedy as well; nothing would surprise me from him except a bad performance. As I mentioned before, the Act One finale where Becker and his son Booster confront each other is one of the most magnetic and compelling scenes I've witnessed in a long time.

Which makes it odd that I have a slight reservation about Dirden. God knows he can act. The man is excellent as a whip-smart FBI agent in the TV series *The Americans*. And I liked him a great deal in *Ma Rainey* at Two Rivers in New Jersey, not to mention as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the Tony-winning drama *All The Way*. Perhaps there's something essentially refined about Dirden. I could buy him as a man who summers in the Hamptons without blinking an eye. But here he simply doesn't have the weight, the *burden* of a man released after twenty long, brutal years behind bars for killing the woman he loved. Dirden's good but he's not as good as he could have been. Nonetheless, anyone who has seen Wilson

before won't want to miss this production. And anyone who hasn't seen Wilson before will enjoy an excellent introduction to one of the giants of the theater.

## **THEATER OF 2017**

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) \*\*

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) \*\*

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) \*\*

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) \*\*

The Present \*\*

*The Tempest* (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) \*\*\* 1/2

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