

## arts

# Theater: Roller Derby and Silly Games? The 1950s Are Back!

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**THE JAMMER** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY

**BLOOD PLAY** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
UNDER THE RADAR FESTIVAL AT PUBLIC THEATER

Two promising new plays share a lot in common. Both are set in the 1950s. Both are broadly comedic but with heart and drama just below the surface. Both are blessed with excellent casts and productions that do them justice. Both have subplots that are unnecessary (one is superfluous and the other is absolutely bonkers). And both could be easily and strongly improved.

First is *The Jammer*, a comic drama set in the rough and tumble world of roller derby. Our hero Jack Lovington (Patch Darragh) was an orphan practically raised by the Church who has discovered a gift for roller skating. Despite the concerns of his local priest and his long-suffering fiancée, Jack quits his job and follows his dream. The squeaky clean Jack is disheartened to discover that roller derby is fixed. But he finds a great new family among the colorful characters on the circuit, including the fast-talking manager Lenny (Billy Eugene Jones) and especially the violent, spitting, cursing, she-devil Lindy Batello (Jeanine Serrales), who is paid to sleep with Jack to keep his mind off his gal back home and on roller derby where it belongs but golly, she might just be falling for the dumb lug.

The script by Rolin Jones has the right light touch for the roller derby scenes and director Jackson Gay and his design team have made a lot of smart choices. The roller derby action is presented very amusingly, with actors pumping their arms up and down as if they're moving along on wheels and extra team members presented as cardboard cutouts that can be tossed aside with abandon during shoving matches. It's all very witty. Add in some hilarious dialogue and solid performers and you've got a lot of fun, right down to a romantic confrontation on a roller coaster, also amusingly staged.

The problem is a subplot involving Jack's local church, where a new priest and an influx of Spanish-speaking parishioners has his old friend and confessor very worried. Jack is quite religious, but why he stops twice to recite lines from the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi is also beyond me. Still, a very game cast elevates everything here. Darragh has a voice that makes him perfect casting for Nathan Lane's brother and a sweet demeanor that grows on you. Jones is very good as the manager trying to hold together the roller derby circuit. Dan Domingues has a blast playing about five roles, all of them well. But the unquestioned scene stealer is Serrales, who has an absolute blast as the tough-talking Lindy. She trash talks the crowd ("Take a drink!" she growls while manhandling her breast), gives as good as she gets in the rink and looks great in lingerie. What a gal!

**SCRIPT DOCTOR -- SPOILERS** You can't see a show this promising and not want it to get even better. So here are some tips. First, drop the entire subplot about Jack's priest back home. He can still be religious and maybe place calls to his priest. But let's not waste time on the new young priest, his friend trying to learn Spanish or watching Jack quote St. Francis. That means we can also drop the clumsy set choice of the church that dominates the action rather confusingly. You've got stained glass structures visible the entire show and that just doesn't make sense when you're at the roller derby. Second, one of the best gags in the show is the idea that Jack's fiancée is horrifically ugly. Under no circumstances should we see her face at the end. More to the point, it's a terrible ending to bring Jack and her back together. She doesn't believe in his dream of roller derby and clearly he doesn't love her or he wouldn't be dragging his heels after two years of engagement. Going on tour allows Jack to break out of his shell and find self-confidence. Instead of having his fiancée cheat on him, get knocked up, abandoned and needing rescue, let her go off and be happy with someone else. That way Jack can find true love with Lindy. When she tells him the letter he wrote to his sweetheart is real love, it should be a test, not the end to their romance. He can tell her that letter was a fantasy but Lindy is reality and that's more romantic than any pipe-dream of bliss. Otherwise, the play needs to be rewritten to give us some reason to want Jack to go back home to his fiancée. Right now, the finale is deeply disappointing because we have no reason to like her. And hey, shouldn't Jack crawl forward on that roller coaster from car to car while declaring his love? This is a fun show that should be that much better.

*Blood Play* has a more serious intent. Written by Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen for the Debate Society, it takes place in the newly renovated basement of a young married couple that has just moved to the suburbs. They're eager to fit in, so it's a thrill when their popular neighbors come over. One drink leads to another and another and some silly party games while they dance nervously around these burgeoning friendships. Adding an odd touch is the presence of a door to door photographer who remembers this neighborhood when it was farmland.

Bev (Hannah Bos) is nervous; she's hosting her first party the next day and a water pipe has just exploded on their new couch. The amiable Marty (Michael Cyril Creighton) calms her down and keeps an eye on their son Ira (Emma Galvin), who backed out of a camping trip with the local Boy Scouts-like troop and has set up a tent in the backyard instead.

Gail and Sam have their own issues. Sam (Hanlon Smith-Dorsey) is wearing half of a cow costume he's donned for a party that night he'd rather not go to. Gail (Birgit Huppuch) is the queen bee at the local Temple where they all belong and Bev is desperate for her approval, which is not lightly given.

Director Oliver Butler has molded this cast into a true ensemble, with the foolishness of mixed drinks and silly party games always creating just the right balance between humor and tension. Huppuch has a juicy role and makes the most of it as the commanding Gail. Bos has the trickier part since Bev must be silly and desperate and yet have enough self-respect to create drama over exactly how much she's willing to sacrifice to get in good with Gail. The husbands have even trickier roles since they're more reactive and passive. But everyone knows exactly who they are supposed to be and the cast feels like a genuine merging of talents with one focus. As my guest said in what constitutes a high compliment, they're all acting in the same play. (Without a strong directorial vision, that's rarely the case.)

Slightly on the outside is Paul Thureen as the photographer who still limps from a case of childhood polio. In one of the most remarkably eccentric and yet honest performances I've seen in a while, he creates a positively bizarre and fascinating character. I'll be remembering this loner for the rest of the year.

The design team is in lock step with the director and cast, including the great set design by Laura Jellinek, costumes by Sydney Maresca that are defining but never jokey (ok, the cow is a little jokey but the Rubbermaid gloves for udders are the perfect touch), and lighting by Mike Riggs that's just the right sort of harsh.

I originally thought the sound design of Ben Truppin-Brown and M. L. Dogg (what great names this entire team has!) was horrible. It has a jarring, moody, haunted house aura that seemed wildly out of place with the story. But by the finale I realized why they were driven to such distraction. It was a necessary heads-up that the play would make a complete about-face and turn into a *Carrie*-like tale of mythic revenge.

Rarely have I seen a show take such a jaw-droppingly bad turn after being essentially so strong. It turns out their son is worshipping some sort of pagan tree god in the backyard that will help him take revenge on the local boys (especially the sons of Gail and Sam) who have been torturing him. (Literally. He was bleeding so bad at one point his mother had to "put him in a Kotex" as she despairingly puts it.) WTF? Indeed, you'll say that again during an utterly pointless scene between the boy and the photographer (who apparently also enjoyed a mild bit of revenge on his teasing siblings thanks to this malignant force) and a long, dull monologue promising retribution. It's a positively nutty and disappointing end to a show that already had all the darkness it needed in comic scenes of adults willing to make themselves foolish to make new friends.

**SCRIPT DOCTOR** -- Clearly, they had a dark vision for this play. It begins with a tree limb snaking through a water pipe in the basement and bursting it. It ends with tree limbs rather embarrassingly writhing about as a boy prays for revenge from the Tree God. Clearly, they need to cut that entire epilogue, which serves no purpose. Watching Bev decide whether or not to have the popular Gail come over and help with the party preparation after realizing it was Gail's sons who bullied her child is drama enough. But if they want to go the absurdist route and can't let go of that tree, why not have the limb in the water pipe keep growing and spreading throughout the show while everyone desperately goes about their fun and games and pretends it's perfectly normal? It's one of many paths the show might take other than the unjustified and silly one it ventures down now. Their son is alone in the backyard all night long and hearing his plaintive but defiant "I'm fine" when his folks check up on him tells us everything we need to know about his unhappy life. Leave the vengeful Tree God to Stephen King.

#### **THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013** (on a four star scale)

*As You Like it* (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) \*\*\*\*

*Chimichangas And Zoloff* \*

*Closer Than Ever* \*\*\*

*Cock* \*\* 1/2

*Harvey with Jim Parsons* \*

*My Children! My Africa!* \*\*\*\*

*Once On This Island* \*\*\*

*Potted Potter* \*

*Storefront Church* \*\* 1/2

*Title And Deed* \*\*\*

*Picture Incomplete* (NYMF) \*\*

*Flambe Dreams* (NYMF) \*\*

*Rio* (NYMF) \*\*

*The Two Month Rule* (NYMF) \*

*Trouble* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*Stealing Time* (NYMF) \*\*

*Requiem For A Lost Girl* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*Re-Animator The Musical* (NYMF) \*\*\*

*Baby Case* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*How Deep Is The Ocean* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*Central Avenue Breakdown* (NYMF) \*\*\*

*Foreverman* (NYMF) \* 1/2

*Swing State* (NYMF) \* 1/2

*Stand Tall: A Rock Musical* (NYMF) \* 1/2

*Living With Henry* (NYMF) \*

*A Letter To Harvey Milk* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2

*The Last Smoker In America* \*\*

*Gore Vidal's The Best Man* (w new cast) \*\*\*

*Into The Woods at Delacorte* \*\* 1/2

*Bring It On: The Musical* \*\*

*Bullet For Adolf* \*

*Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc.* \*\*

*Harrison, TX* \*\*\*

*Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck"* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2

*Pink Milk* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2

*Who Murdered Love* (FringeNYC) no stars

*Storytime With Mr. Buttermen* (FringeNYC) \*\*

*#MormonInChief* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*An Interrogation Primer* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*An Evening With Kirk Douglas* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Sheherizade* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*The Great Pie Robbery* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Independents* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Dick and The Rose* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*Magdalen* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Bombsheltered* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Paper Plane* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Rated M For Murder* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Mallory/Valerie* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Non-Equity: The Musical!* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2  
*City Of Shadows* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking* \*\*\*  
*Salamander Starts Over* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Pieces* (FringeNYC) \*  
*The Train Driver* \*\*\*  
*Chaplin The Musical* \* 1/2  
*Detroit* \*\* 1/2  
*Heartless at Signature* \*\*  
*Einstein On The Beach* at BAM \*\*\*\*  
*Red-Handed Otter* \*\* 1/2  
*Marry Me A Little* \*\*  
*An Enemy Of The People* \*\* 1/2  
*The Old Man And The Old Moon* \*\*\* 1/2  
*A Chorus Line at Papermill* \*\*\*  
*Helen & Edgar* \*\*\*  
*Grace* \* 1/2  
*Cyrano de Bergerac* \*\*  
*Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* \*\*\*  
*Disgraced* \*\*  
*Annie* \*\* 1/2  
*The Heiress* \*\*  
*Checkers* \*\* 1/2  
*Ivanov* \*\*\*  
*Golden Child* at Signature \*\* 1/2  
*Giant at the Public* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Scandalous* \* 1/2  
*Forever Dusty* \*\*  
*The Performers* \*\*  
*The Piano Lesson* at Signature \*\*\* 1/2  
*Un Ballo In Maschera* at the Met \*\*\* 1/2 (singing) \* (production) so call it \*\* 1/2  
*A Christmas Story: The Musical* \*\*  
*The Sound Of Music* at Papermill \*\*\*  
*My Name Is Asher Lev* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Golden Boy* \*\*  
*A Civil War Christmas* \*\* 1/2  
*Dead Accounts* \*\*  
*The Anarchist* \*  
*Glengarry Glen Ross* \*\*  
*Bare* \*\*  
*The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* \*\* 1/2  
*The Great God Pan* \*\* 1/2  
*The Other Place* \*\* 1/2  
*Picnic* \* 1/2  
*Opus No. 7* \*\* 1/2  
*Deceit* \* 1/2  
*Life And Times Episodes 1-4* \*\*  
*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (w Scarlett Johansson) \* 1/2  
*The Jammer* \*\*\*  
*Blood Play* \*\* 1/2

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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