

FLAMING GUNS OF THE PURPLE SAGE

Reviewed by Christopher Soden, Associate Theatre Critic for John Garcia's THE COLUMN

I think in the back of your head, you wonder if a play with this title could possibly live up to its name. Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage is just cheesy and romantic enough to get a jolt from cowboy culture, and just farfetched enough to be funny.

It works because, despite the crazy and bizarre antics, most of us have lived or seen enough to know that extreme chaos does, from time to time, invade our lives.

Like most solid plays there seems to be a theme or pattern to the gathering.

Handsome, naïve, fairy-tale heroic men, & brazen, scheming, whisky-voice dames that can handle a gun, knife or deranged motorcycle fiend. Mysterious playwright Jane Martin (never photographed or interviewed) has created a situation where The Cowboy Code of Honor can stand tall in a hailstorm of worldly, cynical abuse. Where innocence might trump disillusionment.

Fetching, sweet-natured rodeo cowboy, Rob Bob, is protégé and boy candy to ex-rodeo queen, Big 8, who has opened her home in Wyoming to the lad.

Rob Bob is intelligent, but not cunning, embracing the warmth of optimism and using fanciful oaths instead of actual obscenities and curses.

He and Big 8 take care of each other, hanging out with her sister Shirl, who works in a slaughter house, thoughtfully sharing spare ribs with kith and kin.

Late one night after 3AM, a fierce, jittery Goth/punk transient with exotic skin adornments and Technicolor hair, shows up at their front door.

The only name she's comfortable with is "She Devil" and eventually, Big 8 buys her story that she's pregnant and fleeing a Ukrainian sociopath.

It's amusing how cartoony this all seems in print. When Rob Bob asks Big 8 if the mysterious girl has arrived from another planet, he's serious & earnest, and though we may (or may not) be more comfortable with Big 8's retro-ranch style digs, She Devil might be wondering the same thing.

The genius of the play is that Martin (or whatever the playwright's true identity) has found a way to show us just how loopy our culture is while maintaining the semblance of normality. Whatever part of the country you're from, we can all recognize the mythic quality of Western films and the frontier cowboys who helped settle America in its infancy.

Martin doesn't pay homage to the simplistic, raucous cowboy life the way Shepard might, instead she spoofs and embraces it. Rob Bob may not be as savvy as Lucifer Lee, but She Devil knows he won't wind up pissing on his back and telling her it's raining.

Director Terry Dobson has managed this material with a sure hand, balancing the tone between farce and sincerity. Rob Bob and Baxter may be just a little too trusting, but they're always treated with respect. Big 8 and Shirl are brimful of joviality and caterwaul, wearing vivid colors and patterns (thank you, costume designer, Bruce Coleman) that would make Warhol proud, they are the true flaming guns of this show. In fact, they're far more vibrant than the handsome, taciturn men. Even the ferocious Black Dog is more like a troglodyte on crystal meth. HmMMMMMMMMM.

Set Designer Rodney Dobbs has created the kind of homey, recognizable, comfortable interior that immediately puts us at ease. Without giving too much away, I almost think it's far more enervating to witness mayhem when it transpires in a milieu of cozy, domestic bliss than something more ragged and bleak. With its kitchen table, antiquated icebox, and bourbon waiting on the kitchen counter, it's a cheerfully lit domicile, where any one of could imagine finding a grandmother or aunt.

The marvelous, lurid, painterly western movie posters emblazoning the walls, pay tribute to the folkloric adventures that inform the lives of the characters.

Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage features an avid, playful, witty cast.

Emily Jackson as the waif by way of Courtney Love, is charming and surprising.

Dan Ramsey as the dutiful suitor, Baxter Blue, is impeccably cast, and Collin Duwe, as Memphis Donnie Pride, will make your heart go pitty-pat.

Gene Raye Price as Big 8 is more formidable than a hurricane and just as impossible to ignore.

Justin Vorpahl as Rob Bob will tickle your funny bone and your heart.

Sally Soldo as Big 8's sister, Shirl, is a convincing and jubilant match. That have that sister-thang going and it's such a hoot.

Black Dog, played by Jordan Willis, was menacing, vindictive and will scare the hell out of you.

Bear in mind that for all the bombastic mania, Flaming Guns is nothing but delightful comedy (with an intriguing subtext).

Reviewed by Christopher Soden, Associate Theatre Critic for
John Garcia's THE COLUMN

FLAMING GUNS OF THE PURPLE SAGE by Jane Martin
Theatre Too downstairs at Theatre 3
Through August 8, 2010

Performances: Thursdays at 7:30pm, Fridays & Saturdays at
8:00pm, Matinees on Sundays at 2:30pm.

Ticket Prices: \$25 & \$30, Tickets may be purchased by calling
Theatre 3's box office at 214-871-3300, option #1. Tickets may
be requested online at www.theatre3dallas.com