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Stage

Girls on film — men on stage

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## In ‘Legends’ and ‘Pixie DeCosta,’ guys in dresses cause terrible messes — as women

James Kirkwood’s play “Legends” — about a producer trying to put on a show with two famous actresses — was originally conceived as a vehicle for the very kind of actresses the play itself is about. It might have been considered post-modernist farce if it weren’t simply godawful. The original stars (Carol Channing and Mary Martin) made it a popular hit, but a recent revival (with Joan Collins and Linda Evans) was just sad. The play can’t stand on its own. It needs some sturdy gams to keep it from collapsing under the weight of its terribleness.

So what Uptown Players has done with this production is nothing short of alchemy — turning a leaden script into comic gold. And they owe it all to cross-dressing duo B.J. Cleveland and Coy Covington.

The opening scenes of both acts, comprised solely of a conniving producer playing phone tag, are extraneous laugh-free zones that become uncomfortable to watch if you can stay awake during them. But then the stars get to do what makes them stars: sparkle.

First Cleveland enters, touring the stage like Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall while begging for — and receiving — thunderous applause. Then Covington gets his moment a few minutes later, elegant as a panther and bedecked in glamorous duds. As long as they are onstage, you can’t help but laugh.

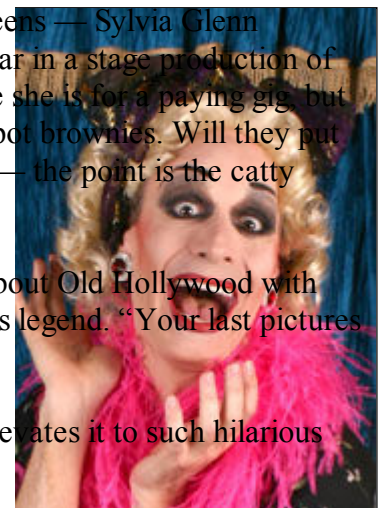
The plot is a shameful dumping ground of clichés. Two fading movie queens — Sylvia Glenn (Cleveland) and Leatrice Monsee (Covington) — are being courted to star in a stage production of “Thelma & Louise: The Musical.” Neither wants to admit how desperate she is for a paying gig, but they also hate each other. There’s even that sitcom staple: a scene with pot brownies. Will they put aside their decades-old rivalry and agree to the show? Who really cares — the point is the catty mewling that takes place along the way.

“Legends” is best during its acid-tongued barbs, a kind of gay fantasia about Old Hollywood with Bette and Joan on “Baby Jane” or any similarly bitchy behind-the-scenes legend. “Your last pictures is still hanging in the post office,” one of them hisses. Me-ow.

But ultimately, the dialogue alone couldn’t keep the play afloat. What elevates it to such hilarious



**LOCAL ‘LEGENDS:’** Fictional stars Sylvia Glenn and Leatrice Monsee have nothing on the actors portraying them at Uptown Players — the crazy comic geniuses B.J. Cleveland, left, and Coy Covington.



heights is the presence of Covington and Cleveland. The drag aspect is only collateral to having such intuitively dishy divas work their magic.

Cleveland's style is the more Borscht Belt of the two — hammy enough to be served at Denny's. Dressed in a silver gown that makes him look like the Chrysler Building, he cocks his leg like a mechanical piggybank for comic emphasis. Covington, he of the droll vocal affectations and faux melodrama, uses a rapier approach, skewering his lines with surgical accuracy.

Both turn up the physical humor in Act 2 to Buster Keaton levels, with the kind of stage business that can't be scripted — it takes comedic genius. And with this production, Cleveland and Covington create their own legends.

They aren't the only men to don dresses to play former movie goddesses. Over at Theatre Too, Paul Taylor (under the guise of fake film stars Marjorie Keyes and Evelyn Rambeaux) takes on two screen queens all by himself in "Look What's Happened to Pixie DeCosta," written and directed by Dallas' Bruce R. Coleman.

Taylor plays two sisters, one a child star (Pixie) the other a revered actress (Margot) who now live together in their moldering penthouse. Margot is confined to a wheelchair, having been crippled years earlier by Pixie, who has gone mad.

If the plot sounds vague familiar, it should. If "Legends" is a back-door look at the making of "Baby Jane," "Pixie" is its spoofy sequel. But just as prevalent are references to "Sunset Boulevard," "Vertigo," "The Dark Mirror," "Gypsy," "Dead Ringer," "A Streetcar Named Desire" and, most patently, the great playwright Charles Ludlam. It's a portmanteau paean to film noir that is also intensely funny.

The plot so closely tracks its inspirations (with a great twist at the end) that the real joy is discovering how Coleman and his cast devise ways to sauce up the familiar. Certainly the dialogue, resplendent with terrific zingers (many gifted upon Rick Espaillat, ideal as a Bogey-like screenwriter), kept my belly jiggling, and the garish, ice cream-colored sets, props and costumes are terrific. But credit the brazen performances with doing the heavy lifting.

Taylor — skeletally regal as Margot, insanely bouncy as Pixie — strikes the perfect tone, somewhere between Dr. Frank-N-Furter and a Tweety and Sylvester cartoon. The show doesn't work without a certain winking mania, and Taylor gets it, as do Ted Wold as a flamboyantly gay neighbor, Chad Peterson as a clueless (and nearly naked) electrician and Lisa Ann Haram as a bitchy gossip. Collectively, they make you want to know what happened, mercilessly tickling you along the way.

*"Legends" ([Uptownplayers.org](http://Uptownplayers.org)) and "Look What's Happened to Pixie DeCosta" ([Theatre3dallas.com](http://Theatre3dallas.com)) run through Nov. 2.*

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