

The Duchess of Malfi



Strawdog Theatre Company (see Resident companies). By John Webster. Adapted by Brandon Bruce and Christine Scarfuto. Dir. Bruce. With ensemble cast. 2hrs 20mins; one intermission.

Justine C. Turner gives a lovely, moving performance at the center of Strawdog's latest—but no, *center's* not quite right. Turner, an eminently watchable Strawdog ensemble member, is fine indeed in the title role of John Webster's Jacobean tragedy. Several of the other principals, including Stephen Dunn as the Duchess's steward and secret husband, John Taflan and Christopher M. Walsh as her scheming brothers, and Joshua Davis as malcontent pawn Bosola, are interesting, even compelling. But Webster's problematic play seems to lack a center of gravity, and this harried new adaptation by Christine Scarfuto and director Brandon Bruce further muddies the waters.

The Duchess, a young widow, is discouraged from remarrying by her brothers Duke Ferdinand (Taflan) and the Cardinal (Walsh) for propriety's sake, but also for their own selfish purposes. Against their wishes, the Duchess marries her steward Antonio (Dunn), a valiant but lowborn man with whom she bears three children in secret. Bosola, the brothers' mole, discovers this, and as Jacobean tragedies tend to go, everyone ends up dead.

Bruce invents a six-actor chorus in flowy robes and punked-out hair that, when not standing in for 20-plus minor characters, lurks at the action's edges performing stylized movement exercises, twisty or pulsating, along with atmospheric sound effects. They serve to create more confusion than clarity, as do Jordan Kardasz's moody lighting and Bruce's rushed pacing. Still, Turner turns out a nuanced performance.—*Kris Vire*



WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, MALFI?
Turner, center, faces her fate.



SOLDIERING ON
Opus 1861's cast salutes another era.

Opus 1861



City Lit Theater (see Resident companies). Devised by Elizabeth Margolius and Terry McCabe. Dir. Margolius. With ensemble cast. 1hr 10mins; no intermission.

Elizabeth Margolius and Terry McCabe created this original chamber piece by combining 20 Civil War-era songs with excerpts from letters written by soldiers stationed in Afghanistan. The implication is that although the conflicts differ in how, when, where and why they were fought (or, in the case of Afghanistan, continue to be fought), certain aspects of war stay the same. Whether the battle takes place in Vicksburg or Kandahar, there are bound to be young people risking their lives and folks at home worried that they won't come back.

The show—performed by four men and two women in modern-day combat fatigues—is best when

Margolius and McCabe stick to generalities like those. In between performances of 19th-century tunes like “When This Cruel War Is Over” and “Hard Times Come Again No More,” we hear from 21st-century service members, whose letters express homesickness, a willingness to die for a cause they believe in and sorrow over fallen comrades. Efforts to find resonances across time are undermined, however, when the production raises issues specific to only one of the conflicts. Under the circumstances, hymns about the abolition of slavery and passages about the friendliness of the Afghan people feel out of context.

The cast's musical performances are better than their readings of the letters, to which they give an unvarying, aw-shucks interpretation. The songs, though, are beautifully sung, with intricate harmonies and simple arrangements that never fail to achieve the desired effect, whether mournful or rousing.—*Zac Thompson*

All Girl Moby Dick



The Mammals (see Fringe & storefront). By Bob Fisher and Sara Gorsky. Dir. Fisher. With ensemble cast. 2hrs 10mins; one intermission.

During the climactic scene of the Mammals' new all-female adaptation of Herman Melville's classic novel, narrator Ishmael (Erin Orr) realizes that inside every person is a man and a whale. “I can choose,” Ishmael says, recognizing that the beast he's been hunting exists within. He urges the audience to repeat the phrase with him, a reminder that the viewer is on this voyage with the rest of the *Pequod's* crew; in the 32-seat Zoo Studios space, it's an intense one.

All Girl Moby Dick boasts impressive production values, particularly in the huge whalebones alongside the set for

the *Pequod's* hull. Thanks to strong acoustics, even when the stage gets exceedingly noisy, dialogue still comes through clearly. Steampunk shark puppets and *Spirited Away*-inspired masks by Jill Fredrickson are used to chilling effect, creating an ethereal atmosphere as the whale hunters sail closer to their legendary prey.

There's nothing inherent in Bob Fisher and Sara Gorsky's adaptation that requires an all-female cast (next up for the Mammals: a workshop of *All Girl Heart of Darkness*), but the nine actresses fully commit to the masculine roles; it's easy to forget the characters are male at all. Amy E. Harmon's Ahab is the heart and soul of the production, playing the disfigured captain with maniacal glee and crushing sadness. There's a grin on Ahab's face when he finally confronts Moby Dick, but his fury burns behind Harmon's piercing gaze.—*Oliver Sava*

Listings

If you want to be listed

Submit information by mail, e-mail (theater@timeoutchicago.com) or fax (312-924-9350) to **Oliver Sava**. Include details, dates, times, address of venue with cross streets, nearest El station and bus routes, contact information, box-office phone number and admission price, if any. **Deadline is 9am Monday, ten days before publication date.**

- Reviewed in this issue
- * Recommended or notable
- ♫ Musical or song-based play
- ◀ Cheap

Touring shows

OPENING ♫ **Cats** Cadillac Palace Theatre, 151 W Randolph St (800-775-2000, broadwayinchicago.com). Tue–Fri 7:30pm; Sat 2, 8pm; Sun 2, 7:30pm. \$25–\$75. Tue 1–May 6. Andrew Lloyd Webber's dancing cats return to create more memories for fans of flamboyant felines.

* ♫ **The Doyle and Debbie Show** Royal George Theatre, 1641 N Halsted St (312-988-9000, doyleanddebbie.com). Wed, Thu 7:30pm; Fri 8pm; Sat 5, 8pm; Sun 2, 6:30pm. \$43.50–\$49.50. 1hr 40mins; no intermission. Through May 27. A seriousness of satire drives *The Doyle and Debbie Show*, a sort of live mockumentary on loan from Nashville, where it's a long-running hit. Doyle (Bruce Arntson) is a washed-up vendor of old-school country music, a small-time aspirant to the Grand Ole Opry who's on his third Debbie (Jenny Littleton). Together with their sidekick and accompanist, Buddy (Matthew Carlton), they regale us with Doyle's greatest hits: masterful parody songs with titles like “When You're Screwing Other Women (Think of Me).” Arntson delivers an expert rendition of the sequined-showman archetype, while Littleton shows off impressive vocals, evoking songstresses from Dolly Parton to Tammy Wynette.—*Kris Vire*

* **Freud's Last Session** Mercury Theater, 3745 N Southport Ave (773-325-1700, freudslastsession.com). Wed 2, 7:30pm; Thu 7:30pm; Fri 8pm; Sat 2, 8pm; Sun 1, 5pm. \$45–\$55, students \$22. 1hr 25mins; no intermission. Through Jun 3. Mark St. Germain's two-hander has an undeniably intriguing hook: an imagined meeting between Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis. The natural concern in a setup like this is talkiness, and St. Germain's dialogue can devolve to debating points. But despite the blatant contrivances required to get these men in the same room, the setting is useful; Britain's anticipation of Chamberlain's speech on the morning of September 3, 1939, provides enough dramatic tension to keep the play from feeling like a forensics tournament. Dold and Rayner, reprising their roles from the New York production, find admirable nuance in their characters' civil discourse.—*KV*

* ♫ **Jersey Boys** Bank of America Theatre, 18 W Monroe St (800-745-3000, broadwayinchicago.com). Tue–Fri 7:30pm; Sat 2, 8pm; Sun 2, 7:30pm. \$35–\$100. 2hrs 35mins; one intermission. Through Jun 3. This jukebox biography features the Four Seasons' greatest hits re-created by talented impressionists with solid musical direction, but the storytelling is sub-*Behind the Music*. If their dialogue and transitions are clunky (and they are), Marshall Brickman and Rick Elice do deserve credit for laying out the story in a way that efficiently and persistently drives us toward the next musical number, which really is the point. And those numbers are

PHOTOS: TOP, ANITA EVANS; LEFT, CHRIS OKEN