

## Show of the week

### All the Fame of Lofty Deeds

**SKULL AND BROS** Martin and Allen, from left, pick and grin.



★★★★★

**The House Theatre of Chicago** (see Fringe & storefront). By Mark Guarino. Music by Jon Langford. Dir. Tommy Rapley. With Nathan Allen.

Rock journalist and Hideout regular Guarino's new work uses Mekons and Waco Bros frontman Langford's music as inspiration; it finds a good match in the House, which opens its seventh season by working with an outside writer for just the second time. The result is its most natural integration of storytelling and music since 2006's *Hatfield & McCoy*.

Yet the storytelling doesn't quite live up to the music, culled from a decade's worth of Langford's Bloodshot Records catalog and performed by a terrific onstage band. Guarino's fantasia, inspired by Langford's visual art as well as his 2004 solo album of the same name, depicts a fading country & western star (Allen) looking back on the indignities of his career. He's guided by a portentous tumbleweed (Corri Feuerstein in one of

costumer Debbie Baer's more fanciful designs, charming in a seemingly unnecessary role).

Guarino's script often sounds like—to quote Anderson Lawler's unctuous radio-host character—a “word jumble” of Old West tropes, all horizons and frontiers. The playwright takes far too long to get past introductions and let us in on where he's going, and his dialogue occasionally lapses into self-parody. Director Rapley's visually gorgeous production (credit Baer, Rapley's choreography and scenic designer Lee Keenan's immersive interpretation of Langford's aesthetic) leaves us at arm's length emotionally. Lawler and Chicago newcomer Patrick Martin, as Lofty's dead brother Lefty, often rise above the rest of the ensemble's doggedly flat portrayals. Allen is as ever a charismatic presence but is stuck with reacting to what's thrown at him rather than driving his own story. But there's enough invention here to suggest a possible rejuvenation of the House's old promise.—KV

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