

The Whipping Man



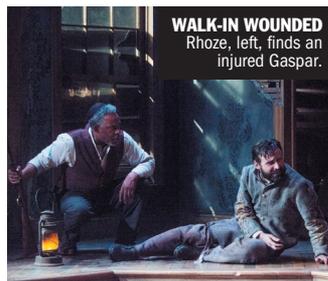
Northlight Theatre (see Resident companies). By Matthew Lopez. Dir. Kimberly Senior. With Derek Gaspar, Tim Edward Rhoze, Sean Parris. 2hrs; one intermission.

As both *Lincoln* and *Django Unchained* rack up Oscar nominations and Civil War books by Doris Kearns Goodwin and Bill O'Reilly share space on Amazon's best-seller list, America continues its neurotic cultural obsession with the War Between the States and its slave-holding past. The intense popularity of young playwright Matthew Lopez's *The Whipping Man*, one of the most-produced works across the country in the last few years, also bears out our unrelenting interest. This smart and affecting play deserves the attention.

The writer finds what might seem impossible: a fresh angle on the war. Taking note of Passover's proximity to the war's end in 1865, Lopez imagines a wounded Jewish Confederate soldier returning to his parents' home in Richmond, Virginia, to find it ransacked but occupied by two of his family's longtime slaves, who are also practicing Jews.

Lopez skillfully metes out the shifting complexities of these men's relationship in the first days after Appomattox. Soldier Caleb (Derek Gaspar) clearly has affection for the older Simon (Tim Edward Rhoze) and younger John (Sean Parris), which they return in differing measures. Yet the injured Caleb, whose gangrenous right leg needs amputating, at first instinctually orders Simon around as the former slave tries to help him. "These things you keep telling me to do," Simon says, "you need to be asking me now."

As the devout and loyal Simon suggests the trio prepare a seder that holds extra significance at this historical moment, the more defiant John slyly reveals new information that ups the stakes. Kimberly Senior's effective, compelling production, featuring three poignant performances on Jack Magaw's handsome unit set, presents a challenging new take on our history of incivility.—*Kris Vire*



WALK-IN WOUNDED
Rhoze, left, finds an injured Gaspar.

PHOTOS: MICHAEL BROSILOW



SHOW OF THE WEEK

DANCE HALL DAYS
Topol helps Zimmerman keep his pants on.

Sweet Charity

The 1966 musical *Sweet Charity* is, charitably speaking, an odd duck. While the score by Cy Coleman and Dorothy Fields contains such enduring earworms as "Big Spender" and "If My Friends Could See Me Now," the story of the all-too-optimistic Manhattan "dance-hall hostess" Charity Hope Valentine is jaggedly told. Loosely based on Federico Fellini's 1957 film *Nights of Cabiria*, about the travails of a Roman prostitute, the musical—conceived by Bob Fosse and with a corny book by Neil Simon—doesn't seem to have a thesis, ping-ponging its plucky heroine from one episode to another with little sense of direction.

Yet despite the show's on-paper weirdness, in the right hands it can overflow with charm—as it does in Michael Halberstam's magnetically intimate revival at Writers' Theatre. Halberstam smartly reduces the cast to 11 well-selected actors. The



Writers' Theatre (see Resident companies). Book by Neil Simon. Music by Cy Coleman. Lyrics by Dorothy Fields. Dir. Michael Halberstam. With Tiffany Topol, Jarrod Zimmerman, Karen Burthwright, Ericka Mac, Jeff Parker. 2hrs 30mins; one intermission.

clubby confines of his staging give more credibility (or at least forgiveness) to the strange turns of Charity's story, like her extended Act I encounter with international movie star Vittorio Vidal. At such close range, it seems more reasonable that Vidal plays such a key role in the proceedings yet never returns; isn't that how these things happen?

Musical director Doug Peck updates the arrangements, making Coleman's score sound

more jazzy than Broadway brassy. Act II's "The Rhythm of Life," a generic hippie parody that Coleman and Fields could have inserted into any show, cooks with vitality as led by James Earl Jones II and choreographed by Jessica Redish. The gangly Jarrod Zimmerman finds an ideal role in nebbishy, neurotic love interest Oscar Lindquist; even if he can't fully sell Simon's unconvincing denouement, his claustrophobic reaction to a stalled elevator is a triumphant bit of physical comedy.

And then there's this production's real discovery: Tiffany Topol. As the open-hearted and out-of-luck broad at the play's center, Topol exerts a captivating charisma as well as accomplished dance skill and impressive acting. Whether or not her friends could believe it if they could see her now, you'll be able to say you saw her when.—*Kris Vire*

The Aliens



A Red Orchid Theatre (see Resident companies). By Annie Baker. Dir. Shade Murray. With Steve Haggard, Brad Akin, Michael Finley. 2hrs 20mins; one intermission.

Annie Baker's quiet, gentle and extraordinarily beautiful study of a tenuous connection among three awkward young men may not satisfy viewers accustomed to high-speed narrative. "Something had better happen in the second act," an audience member near me muttered as the lights came up at intermission.

It's true that little in the way of traditional "action" takes place in the rising playwright's 2010 work, set in the shabby backyard of the kind of small-town coffeehouse that continually pipes



COFFEEHOUSE BAND Akin, Finley and Haggard, from left, have a backyard jam.

Edie Brickell and the Indigo Girls over the stereo. (The soundtrack snippets are just one piece of Brando Triantafyllou's spot-on sound design.) Thirtyish slackers Jasper (Steve Haggard) and KJ (Brad Akin) view this patch of land as their rec room, possibly with tacit approval from the management. Timid, teenage new employee Evan (Northwestern undergrad Michael Finley, making an impactful professional debut) at first tries to shoo

them away but soon comes under their cool and mildly dangerous thrall.

Director Shade Murray and his fierce cast lean hard into Baker's lulls, embracing the script's silences to the point of occasional discomfort. Yet audience members who go along with this small, still story will undoubtedly be moved by its subtle portrayal of how even the slightest intimation of acceptance can change an individual's trajectory.—*Kris Vire*