

Salvation by Spieler

A review of *The Great Magoo*

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In Beth Schachter's production of *The Great Magoo*, "man-killers" are the only women allowed a man's redemptive love. Her direction of this Ben Hecht/Gene Fowler Broadway flop succeeds in overcoming banality by scrutinizing precisely the parts of the play considered common by its original audiences. Subtle nuanced acting supports her goal, and we are left with a disturbing play about women's roles in the past and today.

The Great Magoo, in Schachter's retelling, is the story of two ambitious 1930's women, Julie and Jackie, and the men to whom they hitch their idealism and hopes of success. Julie is "one of those female geniuses," as she puts it, who wants a career on Broadway, marrying anyone necessary for her success. Jackie is a promiscuous Coney Island dancer, lured into a brief and jealous monogamy by a flagpole-sitting Sailor who embodies women's repression by the authoritarian male. Lest the story of the women's failed dreams in a patriarchal society prove too depressing, a male redeemer, Nicky, is provided, who through his lying and womanizing still remains the women's ultimate salvation. The meaning of this rescue is made more ambiguous by Nicky's character: can true hope spring from a man embodying all the most denigrating traits of thirties culture? Or are we to believe that ultimately Julie 'loves' Nicky in the same way she has 'loved' all the other silver-back males she has married to further her career?

The show opens with a Schachter conceit: two "Tourists," played by John Smelcer and Caitlin Crouse, read the introductory stage directions over a microphone. Schachter used this technique, stolen from the avant-garde, frequently during the production; character and scene descriptions read aloud to compensate for the Kyle Chepulis' abstract setting. The successfulness of this gambit varied; in a preview performance it was being utilized with much more frequency and considerably less success, but by

the closing performance it had been oiled into a helpful aid to scene setting. Schachter's attempts at Wellman-esque term definition during the play were thankfully abandoned, and the technical problems garbling the microphone seemed to have been mostly solved.

The setting described by the tourists is that of a busy Coney Island amusement park. Chepulis' setting and Brian Aldous' lighting cooperate nicely to represent this and the many other locations described in the play with simple changes of acting space or a color-shift on the walls. The many gadgets and gizmos built into the set amused the audience, but one felt they gave up their secrets far too quickly to keep us interested. By the end of the first five minutes dumbwaiters had appeared in the walls, the rolling platform had trundled across the stage, the pneumatic ticket booth was visible, and the walls had changed color several times. Even despite showing us his hand early, though, Chepulis still had a few tricks to reveal: a revolving door, a hidden hatch and chaise lounge, and a hide-away bed folding down from the walls.

Such gimmicks were fun, but unnecessary to the play's message. An ordinary production would have suffered stagehands to reconfigure the various pieces of the stage, but Schachter's sense of inter-scene continuity and a feeling of magic prevailed. The actors' versatility helped push this vision along; with each actor playing multiple roles, the audience was continually guessing who was under which outrageous costume using what accent. The ticket-booth Tante revealed after the tourists' dialog was typical: the actress Robin Bailey had been transformed into a weary old hag, hawking tickets to the tourists.

Tante's appearance is followed by our introduction to Sailor Burke (Marc Rosen) and his romantic interest, Jackie (Jacqueline Klein). The Sailor

refuses to compete in a flagpole-sitting test of endurance because, he says, he can't trust Jackie, especially with Nicky (Greg Bratman) around. Sean Mewshaw enters as Harry Costello, a side-show man selling peeps at a putrid whale. He is joined by Sean Garret-Roe as a Health Inspector wishing to shut down Costello's show. They're waiting for Nicky to arrive with the permit from the "big fellas," which he eventually does, riding in on an old woman's lap. John Smelcer gives the audience a hilarious double-take when he is revealed playing the old woman, beard and all.

Mewshaw's Italian accent lapsed badly several time, but his character had his share of great moments. At one point Costello turns to the audience and accuses them of "putting the finger on him" and unleashes a stream of Italian which those who understood it apparently thought very amusing. A 1930's stereotype of Italians as anarchists and communists is in evidence in Costello's lines, but Schachter has chosen not to make much of this; the emphasis seems to be squarely on the men and women of the piece, and their societal roles.

Furthering that point, we are introduced to some of Nicky's "dames:" Pauline, whom Nicky has gotten pregnant; Tante, the mother-figure who claims oedipally to be "the only cutie on this island he hasn't laid and forgotten." As the queen of the "dames," Julie (Jessie Carry) is introduced, claiming what's wrong with Broadway is "too much opera singing" — "what people want is something natural." Ironic, in a production whose style clearly marks the anti-naturalistic fervor of the avant-garde.

Courting Julie is Joe Weber (Davis McCallum), a man who claims he's the perfect match for Julie and her ambition. Indeed he is: Joe's egomania and ruthless quest for success are the male counterpoint of Julie's machinations. In his hypocritical quest to convince the world of the reality of

his alleged genius, he achieves only absurdity, never transcending his side-show roots to capture Broadway. In the same way, perhaps we are meant to believe that Julie will never be able to transcend her gender to grasp her success; that all her ambitions are impractical imitation.

The convergence of these archetypal characters generate some very interesting sparks; in any case, the playwrights have thrown in a good number of bit parts to keep the ball rolling. Caitlin Crouse's Dummy Dolan is notable, although her empathetic role seems strangely cross-gendered. Would we as easily accept Dolan's show of affection for Nicky if it wasn't obvious that Dolan was played by a woman? Marc Rosen's Professor Jonas, and Paul Serritella's three roles were also very engaging. Joe Weber's band also includes some fine character work.

This play transcends its source material not because of the quality of the acting, however, but because of the collision of Thirties culture with more modern thought on women's roles. Julie bounces from man to man in pursuit of her dream, ultimately confronting the aptly named Mr. Cuntzmiller, where the trade of sex for work becomes most apparent. Jackie in her quest for love suffers objectification for a man who finally "streaks down the pole with his pants on fire and throws himself at some red-headed chippie." Woman's ambitions are fruitless, we're told; the only trading chip she has is her virginity, which can only be cashed once. Yet, in a strange re-enactment of prevailing culture, a woman can be redeemed by a man. Julie's redemption smacks strongly of the biblical — Nicky insists that to his mind she's been washed clean: "No one's touched you, just me." But we must still doubt the authenticity of the experience. Julie asks, "Are you sure it's not just you talking?" Nicky's role as a spieler and a womanizer casts a shadow over Julie's fate which we must apply to all humanity.

At first glance, *The Great Magoo* could be dismissed as a harmless avant-garde retelling of Broadway fluff. The current production manages to transcend this — not by the stylistic imposition or the fine acting, but simply through the context given by a modern audience. *The Great Magoo* is a fine show, produced well and featuring some wonderful tour-de-force acting. By watching it closely and thinking, you may discover even more.