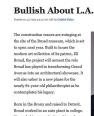




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# When 'spoilers' are essential elements of a discussion

By Don Shirley | April 19, 2014 11:01 AM

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Like most of my colleagues who comment on theater, I'm usually wary about revealing spoilers, especially when they're in new scripts.

As a result, occasionally I sidestep information about what happens in a production (as do those who write about other narrative forms such as movies, TV series or books), although in retrospect that information might seem, well, critical to the character of the production.

I'm beginning to think that those of us who write about theater -- especially those of us who write apart from the early-deadline pressure and relatively larger readership of, say, the LA Times -- probably shouldn't be quite as cautious about the use of well-flagged spoilers as those who write for what was once considered "the newspaper of record" in LA, or those who write about the other narrative art forms.

Theater is ephemeral. In LA, most productions are available for only a few weeks or months -- compared to the relative permanence of movies, TV series and books. Of course, theatrical scripts remain ready for possible revivals after a first production, but usually no subsequent productions are guaranteed at the moment when a potential theatergoer is deciding whether to buy a ticket to the premiere production.

Even if subsequent productions are likely to take place, what are the chances that they will be as accessible as the current production? The first revival might occur in another continent, for all we usually know.

Tickets to labor-intensive, one-of-a-kind theater events usually cost more than the fees charged for mass-produced movies, TV series and books (which can even be legally borrowed from libraries for no fee at all). Attending theater also usually requires more logistical planning than watching screen imagery or reading books.

For all of these reasons, potential theatergoers deserve to know a little more information in advance than would-be consumers of films, TV or books. And sometimes that information includes so-called "spoilers." After all, one reader's spoiler might be another person's reason to buy a ticket -- or not to buy a ticket.

Many people associate spoilers only with such obvious no-nos as revealing whodunit in a review of

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an old-fashioned mystery. But spoilers can go far beyond disclosing that the butler did it. Some readers might not want to know in advance about a particularly controversial topic -- or even a particularly distinctive moment of physical comedy -- but avoiding any mention of these components of the production can result in a very superficial critique.

Writers can always issue warnings about spoilers that are approaching soon in an article -- giving those readers who choose to avoid all potential spoilers a chance to stop reading in time to dodge the revelation or the description of something they would rather not know, while providing this additional information to readers who would appreciate a more thorough awareness of what's in store for them. And so:

**SPOILERS AHEAD:** I'm about to discuss two examples of what some readers might consider "spoilers," so if you really hate the idea of knowing "too much" in advance about the puppetized production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Broad Stage or "Rest" at South Coast Repertory, you should stop reading here.

I'll start with "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Broad Stage. It might seem inconceivable that anyone would come up with something surprising, on the "spoiler" level, for a production of one of the world's most frequently seen plays (perhaps the most frequently seen?), yet this Bristol Old Vic/Handspring Theatre production has accomplished the unthinkable.

In fact, it's precisely because many theatergoers might be deterred from seeing still one more "Midsummer" that I'm going to discuss this particular aspect of the current production a little more explicitly than most of my colleagues have.

It involves the you're-so-vain character of Bottom -- the preening would-be star of the mechanicals' amateur theatrics. This Bottom's the top -- the funniest Bottom I've ever seen.

And it's not only because of the talents of actor Miltos Yerolemou in the role. It's because when this Bottom is transformed into the ass who enchants Titania, the actor is splayed over the top of a little cart that transforms into the rough shape of an ass, with his bare buttocks facing up. It's an ingenious and hilarious way to play on the character's name -- and, in retrospect -- it's amazing that we veterans of many "Midsummer"s have never seen it.

All by itself, this bottoms-up Bottom creates a reason to see this one more "Midsummer." And I doubt that my bare-bones, inadequate description of it in the above paragraph will weaken the comic charge it provides in the theater.

By the way, for some unknown reason I was assigned an unusual seat -- in one of the Broad boxes overlooking the audience as well as the stage. Bottom's bottom didn't register nearly as strongly with a friend who sat near the rear of the orchestra. You might want to take that in mind if you have a choice of seats.

Of course, with the Broad run closing on April 19, you might not get much of a choice, I can't recommend the entire production -- it's a little too long -- but most of the other design elements are also much more creative than those of most garden-variety "Midsummer"s. So anyone who would like a new perspective on this familiar and beloved play should take a look.

The element within Samuel Hunter's "Rest" that I'm about to reveal could hardly be more different from the rowdy "Midsummer" display of Bottom. Most of the reviews will tell you that the play is about the three remaining residents and the harried staff of a convalescent center in the middle of an Idaho winter -- and how everyone reacts when the most demented of the three residents is reported to have wandered off into the snow.



Without telling you every detail, let me add that the play is also about the possibility of mercy killing. Mentioning this element might prevent some people from seeing the play, but it could attract others who have some professional or personal interest in the agonizing decision-making that's often faced by those who care for the sick or the elderly.

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This sounds grim, and "Rest" certainly is no "Midsummer Night's Dream." But Hunter, who has already made waves in the LA area with "A Bright New Boise" and "The Whale," leavens the tone with some comic relief from the institution's hapless boss (Antaeus Company co-artistic director Rob Nagle), and he amplifies the subject of indecision over the end of life with a parallel subplot about indecision over the beginning of life.

Directed by South Coast's co-founder Martin Benson, the production also features three South Coast veterans in the roles of the residents -- Lynn Milgrim, Richard Doyle and Hal Landon. Milgrim is sharply nuanced in the pivotal role, and those who have spent several decades watching Doyle and Landon mature into older roles at SCR won't want to miss this latest chapter - although let's hope that it's far from the last chapter of their SCR saga.

Photo from "Rest" by Debora Robinson/SCR

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