

Two 100-proof spoofs. A dynamic 'Doubtfire'. Two music-man musicals.

'DurAntony,' the Montalbán, 'Reefer,' 'Strange Loop,' 'Jelly's Jam,' 'Spy...Rehab'

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If Matt Walker's Duran Duran-ish Antony and Cloie Wyatt Taylor's Cleopatra weren't posing here, they might notice Rick Batalla's ominous Octavius, in "Duran DurAntony & Cleopatra," a Troubie comedy at the Colony. Photo: Eddy Will.

The proof is in the laughter. How hearty and frequent is it?

When we're in a live theater watching startlingly funny productions, the guffaws quickly escalate. Our proximity to those who are creating the comedy seems to help the laughs bounce off the walls, coming right back at us.

Let's start with "Duran DurAntony & Cleopatra," which opened last weekend and unfortunately closes this weekend at the Colony Theatre in Burbank. That strangely awkward title won't puzzle anyone who has been around LA theater long enough to have seen as many Troubadour Theater concoctions as I have.

Of course — mirth master Matt Walker's Troubies are juxtaposing the music of the 1980s Brit pop sensation Duran Duran with their skewed take on the tragedy "Antony and Cleopatra," by that 1600s Brit stage sensation William Shakespeare.

Sounds like too much of a stretch? Hey, stretching can be healthy — and, in this case, hilarious. I'm not going to give away any of the verbal and visual punchlines and thereby risk spoiling them for those who might snag some of the few remaining tickets.

But I am going to pose this question — why are the Troubies providing their current laugh riot for only two weekends? Just three years ago, they performed "Lizastrata" at the Getty Villa's outdoor amphitheatre, which has more seats than the Colony, for three weekends. I thank the Getty's Greek and Roman gods for their support of the Troubies over the years, but I can understand why the Getty might be reluctant to wander into Troubie topics that don't involve the Getty's specialized slice of antiquity.

Why don't larger theater organizations recruit the Troubies as the Getty periodically does? Did Center Theatre Group explore asking the Troubies to fill one of the many holes during CTG's recent non-season at the Mark Taper Forum? I've done no checking, but I've seen no evidence of it.

To be fair, on the Troubadour website, there isn't much evidence that the Troubies pursue such partnerships, although the site does offer links to investigate booking the company for online events such as parties and workshops, for site-specific film shoots, or for licensing of Troubie titles for non-Troubie productions. The printed "Duran DurAntony" program lists "special thanks" to a list of more than 30 supporters, and the back page looks like a paid ad by one particular events company, but the website lacks any mechanism to subscribe to Troubie shows or to donate on a regular basis.

The obvious need for a higher Troubie profile was drilled into me this past weekend not only by attending “Duran DurAntony” but also by attending “Russall S. Beattie Presents Unauthorized and Unofficial Batette Follies of 1939,” a so-called “Dark Night Parody” at the Montalbán Theatre, on Vine Street in the block south of its famous intersection with Hollywood Boulevard.

This venue is approaching its 100th birthday — it opened as Wilkes’ Vine Street Theatre in January 1927. In my years of covering LA theater, it was known as the Huntington Hartford and the Doolittle, before it re-opened as the Montalbán in 2004. Its seating capacity is currently listed as 930.

But the new show inhabiting it, “Batette Follies of 1939,” is unlikely to fill those seats. The “Batette” and “1939” in the title perhaps refer to the launch of the Batman franchise with the first comic book in 1939, although the Batman angle is only lightly emphasized during most of the show — mostly in design elements. The second word “Follies” suggests (at least to me) long lines of dancers in high-stepping choreography. But no.

Here, we get a largely listless and mirthless procession of unnamed singers, dancers and circus performers, often soloists, united primarily by revealing outfits on most of the women, minus any hint of the “parody” in the subtitle, and straying far from the year 1939 (the songs include Paul Simon’s “The Sounds of Silence” and the Eurythmics’ “Sweet Dreams”).

With the theater’s own centennial and then the Olympics rapidly approaching, it’s high time for someone to take active measures to restore this theater to its former programming glory. Maybe this “someone” should start by thinking about inviting the Troubies into the Montalbán. Then “someone” should consider if this space could house larger productions (either for-profit or non-profit) that might benefit artistically from being in a smaller venue than the Pantages (one block away) or the downtown Ahmanson.

Teens and a tot try terrible tokens



J. Elaine Marcos and Anthony Norman in “Reefer Madness” at the Whitley. Photo: Andrew Patino

Meanwhile, “Reefer Madness” — much more clearly a “parody” than “Batette” is — currently inhabits a 170-seat space, previously known as King King but now known as the Whitley, on Hollywood Boulevard about a half-mile to the west of Vine.

That title rings a bell? Yes, it was the name not only of the 1936 wicked-weed-warning propaganda movie but also of the Kevin Murphy-Dan Studney musical mocking that original movie. The musical was born 25 years ago at the Hudson Theatre, one mile south of the Whitley. It then moved to off-Broadway, before its adaptation into a movie for Showtime. Changes occurred within each incarnation, including the current one.

This latest version is in an immersive 170-seat space, and the actors are on an Equity Cabaret contract. In director/choreographer Spencer Liff’s staging, they move to a variety of small spots throughout a dark room that has the look of a “reefer den.” That’s also the moniker of the cafe and bar next door, which is connected to an alfresco “Victory Garden” and offers after-show entertainment (but no cannabis, because California law prevents alcohol and cannabis from being licensed for sale at the same location). According to co-producer and co-writer Murphy, the producers hope that the sales of food and drink will help pay for the production.

I laughed a lot during “Reefer Madness.” The stellar leads include the ubiquitous Bryan Daniel Porter in three roles — the Lecturer, Jack and Jesus — plus Anthony Norman and Darcy Rose Byrnes as the young lovers, Nicole Parker as the Den mother, and Thomas Dekker and J. Elaine Marcos (whose character is nursing a baby) as the Den’s wilder inhabitants. The long history of “Reefer Madness” prevents it from surprising us to the same extent that we marvel at the ingenuity of “Duran DurAntony,” but this revised “Reefer” is certainly an admirably professional addition to the cornucopia of theatrical offerings in Hollywood (which is hosting the annual Hollywood Fringe Festival at many small venues right now).

McClure lights the fire within ‘Mrs. Doubtfire’

Hollywood is also the current stop on the national tour of the Broadway musical “Mrs. Doubtfire,” at the Pantages, across the street from the Hollywood/Vine subway station. Like “Reefer Madness,” “Mrs. Doubtfire” is based on a non-musical movie from the last century.

For today’s audiences, “Mrs. Doubtfire” is the more familiar film — the 1993 comedy in which Robin Williams played the struggling actor Daniel, separated from his wife Miranda in San Francisco. Daniel yearns to see their three minor children more often than a custody agreement will allow, so he uses the skills of his costume-make-up-designer friends and his own vocal prowess to pose as an older, Scottish woman named Mrs. Doubtfire, in order to get a job as his own children’s undercover nanny.

If you can suspend your disbelief long enough to accept this premise, as millions did while watching the movie, it might be even easier to do it within the framework of a musical — where you already are suspending disbelief in order to enjoy the singing and dancing.

And in the case of this musical, it’s a cinch. I found myself thoroughly entertained and finally moved by this story. Much of this is due to a dynamic performance by Rob McClure as Daniel. He has technical comedy skills approaching those of Williams plus an ability to sing and dance, resulting in a magnetism that surely pierces even the most remote corners of the sometimes forbidding Pantages.

Jerry Zaks’ staging, with choreography by Lorin Latarro, works wonders with the sprightly book by Karey Kirkpatrick and John O’Farrell. Ethan Popp’s musical

supervision handily supports Karey Kirkpatrick's and Wayne Kirkpatrick's hummable score.

The time frame has been updated into something like the 2020s. And a switch of Miranda's career from interior design to active-fashion design provides Mrs. Doubtfire with a new opportunity to show off her moves in "The Shape of Things to Come" near the beginning of the second act.

The Pantages run features McClure with his real-life wife Maggie Lakis playing Miranda, but apparently another actress will take over the role when "Mrs. Doubtfire" returns to the area, at Orange County Performing Arts Center, Sept. 24-Oct. 6.

'Strange Loop' in an oversized space

I wrote, above, about Hollywood's under-utilized 930-seat Montalban Theatre and my wish that it could house major productions that might benefit artistically from being in a somewhat smaller venue than the nearby Pantages or the downtown Ahmanson.

The present resident of the Ahmanson is a prime example of this phenomenon. It's Michael R. Jackson's Pulitzer- and Tony-winning "A Strange Loop," playing in a 2015-seat configuration of the Ahmanson (after an earlier run in a 1025-seat space at the co-producing American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco). While watching it, I couldn't help but think that this production, staged by Stephen Brackett, belongs in a smaller theater. Essentially, it's a one-character show, loosely based on playwright Jackson himself.

That one character is a young, Black, queer, would-be musical theater writer, Usher (Malachi McCaskill), who is working as an usher, yes, at "The Lion King" on Broadway. True, there are seven other actors on the stage. But they're all portraying Usher's many "Thoughts" as he frets about the very tenuous state of his career, his appreciation of "white girl" singers such as Liz Phair (who wrote a song called "A Strange Loop"), his nagging parents who suggest that he should emulate Tyler Perry — and just about everyone else at this point in his life.

It's a deliberately insular script — one that might fit more comfortably, for its own artistic purposes, into one of LA's many midsize or even small theaters. Of course I realize that non-Broadway productions of Broadway-winning musicals have commercial exigencies, but even from a relatively good seat in the Ahmanson, I felt too far away from this "Strange Loop." Later I looked up the seating capacity of the

Lyceum Theatre, this show's home on Broadway — 922, just about the same size as the Montalbán and not even half the size of the Ahmanson. For this musical, smaller would have been better.



John Clarence Stewart and cast in "Jelly's Last Jam," at Pasadena Playhouse. Photo: Jeff Lorch

"Jelly's Last Jam," at the 643-seat Pasadena Playhouse, is a very different musical about a very different Black musician — Jelly Roll Morton (1890-1941), the self-proclaimed "inventor of jazz." George C. Wolfe's script attempts to cover a few of the most dramatic points of Morton's life, as a perhaps unnecessary supernatural character named Chimney Man guides him in looking backward from the vantage point of his death in Los Angeles, as opposed to the one-moment-in-time of a young artist's life depicted in "Strange Loop."

Wolfe casts a critical eye at times, especially at Morton's vanity about his Creole roots. But the serious commentary, as well as a few missing chapters of Morton's vivid life, feel sidetracked by all of the exhilarating singing and dancing that accompanies Morton's music and additional music by Luther Henderson, with lyrics by Susan Birkenhead. Dell Howlett's choreography keeps the stage in motion so often that we could forget that Morton was famous as a composer and pianist, not as a dancer.

In comparison to “A Strange Loop,” it’s refreshing to see four other characters with substantive roles in “Jam.” Still, playing Morton in Kent Gash’s staging, John Clarence Stewart looks a little miscast, at least in comparison to photos of the real Morton.

“Jelly’s Last Jam” was initially produced at the Mark Taper Forum in 1991, before moving to Broadway. Wolfe was the original director, in both LA and on Broadway.

And one smaller spoof

After covering the spoofs “Duran DurAntony” in Burbank and “Reefer Madness” in Hollywood, I’ll suggest another one for Westsiders: the premiere of “The Spy Who Went Into Rehab,” by Gregg Ostrin, directed by Cyndy Fujikawa at Pacific Resident Theatre in Venice, starring Satiar Pourvasei in the title role of a James Bond-like, toxically masculine former secret agent.

The title conveys just about as much as you ought to know about it before you see it, but I’ll add that it’s quite amusing — fun but not quite capable of triggering the sidesplitting that occurs at the bigger, aforementioned spoofs. “Spy...Rehab” does have a couple of surprises near the end, which I absolutely should not discuss.

LAT slightly expands its opinions about LATheater, but...

The online LA Times Essential Arts newsletter, which had been running on Saturdays as a weekend-planning guide, has begun running on Thursdays, which makes sense. And the first Thursday installment this week ran a paragraph of reporter Ashley Lee’s thoughts about “Mrs. Doubtfire” at the Pantages. Considering that I wrote in my last Angeles Stage post about “a shocking shrinkage” of space for LA Times theater reviews, all of which apparently now had to be written by critic Charles McNulty, this is a tiny step forward. But it doesn’t remedy the newspaper’s almost-total lack of coverage of locally-generated productions.

“Mrs. Doubtfire,” as I write above, is part of a Broadway tour. The only completely-locally-generated production that McNulty has reviewed since my last post was of “Jelly’s Last Jam” at Pasadena Playhouse.

Although McNulty included some positive comments about “A Strange Loop” itself in a recent interview with Michael R. Jackson, based on his experience of seeing it in the smaller venues in New York, he hasn’t (yet, as I post this) written a separate review of

the Ahmanson version — which would have been a likelier vehicle for any reservations he might have had about it.

While the regular abbreviation of “Los Angeles Times” is LAT, that also could serve as the abbreviation of “Los Angeles Theater.” But apparently the readers of the former will have to look elsewhere for comprehensive opinions on the latter.