

THEATRE REVIEW

Moonlight and Magnolias

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When it comes to writing, it'd be easy to think it's all about the way you put words on paper.

But as many writers will tell you, before you get those words on paper, you have to have the discipline to actually sit down at your desk or computer...and stay there, while you wrestle with sentences and agonize over words. Suddenly, everything else starts looking more appealing, from alphabetizing your DVD collection to regrouting your tub. It's easy to let anything and everything distract you.

No discipline, no writing.

In "Moonlight and Magnolias," playing at Bonita's Stage 88 through March 8, movie producer David O. Selznick (Jim Corsica) knows that. So he literally locks himself in his studio office for five days with top rewrite man, Ben Hecht (Gil Carrandi, Jr.) and director Victor Fleming (Steve Pozgay).

Their project: to write the screenplay for the epic "Gone With the Wind," to turn Margaret Mitchell's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1,037-page tome into 130 pages of actor-friendly screenplay.

Selznick's gone through at least 10 other versions already, and just fired director George Cukor. He's halted production on the film, though he denies it, losing \$50,000 a day.

He soon discovers he has more problems: Hecht, his top script doctor, has never read the book. He doesn't even know the plot or the characters. And he and newly hired director Fleming have a healthy dislike for each other.

Selznick doesn't care. He's desperate. So with orders to his executive secretary, Miss Poppenghul (Lucy Harris), that they shouldn't be disturbed, he locks the three of them in his office, vowing they'll have a finished screen-

play at the end of five days. If they don't kill each other first.

Hecht simply doesn't understand the novel. "Does this movie have to be set in the Civil War?" he asks, warning, "No Civil War movie ever made a dime."

But he's also the play's conscience, appalled that the characters are pro-slavery and that Scarlett O'Hara, a rich, spoiled brat, shoots and kills a northern soldier, hits a black woman, and lusts after another woman's man. Even Fleming bemoans the fact that "We have a heroine that doesn't have enough class to be a hooker."

But the situation is just a theatrical construct which allows playwright Ron Hutchinson to comment upon the creative process, the nature of movies and Hollywood's golden age.

And there are some wonderful monologues, most of them delivered by Corsica. For example, in a little declaration of love, Selznick says, "What is a movie? Specks of light stuck to a strip of celluloid, a goddamn authentic miracle. Did you ever think of it like that? A series of moments frozen in time by the greatest time machine ever invented."

And then there's this gem about the creative process, and why those in the arts do what they do: "I know what I do to make sense of the world — or, if not make sense of it, keep too busy to be scared there is no sense. I make movies. Fleming finds a way every day to make some sort of order out of the chaos of the movie set, you mold a shapeless world with the power of words...you don't have a choice. It's what you do."

This lightweight comedy has its moments. There are chuckles, but the laughs didn't start coming until 45 minutes into Act I. Pozgay gets some of the night's biggest response by re-enacting Melanie giving birth and Prissy, the maid. (As Hecht's never read the book, Selznick and Fleming have to act out the plot



PHOTO BY SABRINA SHARPE/ STAGE 88 THEATRE

L to R: Steve Pozgay as "Victor Fleming", Jim Corsica as "David O'Selznick", Lucy Harris as "Miss Poppenghul" and Gil Carrandi Jr. as "Ben Hecht"

and recite dialogue.) Pozgay's physical humor drew constant laughs, as the large actor twisted his shirt-tails and delivered Prissy's classic lines about "knowin' nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies." And Corsica is all aflutter as Scarlett, waving his hands in the air and declaring "Fiddle-dee-dee" in falsetto.

I wish director Michelle Vehlhaber had pushed these actors a little more; their dialogue needs more urgency, a bit more edge. (Corsica seems too nice to be a ruthless movie producer.) With a little more snap to their delivery, the play could've been even more engaging. At times the actors seemed to be saying lines, rather than reacting to each other and having genuine conversations.

Newcomer Carrandi is well-cast in the role as Hecht, the questioning, cynical former newspaperman. Corsica has great moments of poeticism about movies and "Gone With the Wind," while Pozgay has perfected glowering to an art. Poor Harris has a thankless role; her dialogue consists mostly of saying "Yes Mr. Selznick," "No Mr. Selznick" and taking orders from him.

The set is a solid one, with a couch center-stage and movie posters and black-and-white publicity photos on the wall. The lighting

could be better, as sometimes, when the actors stood up from the couch, their faces would be in shadow.

There are some great aural special effects towards the end, when you hear scenes from the movie as Selznick flips through the completed screenplay.

The program calls "Moonlight and Magnolias" "a comedy of 'epic' proportions..." Not quite.

It's more a light diversion than an epic comedy. But this love letter to the agony of the creative process and the wonders those travails produce, does provide some chuckles and laughs. ■

If you go

- >>What: "Moonlight and Magnolias"
- >>When: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, through March 8
- >>Where: Stage 88 Theatre at Bonita Springs Community Hall, 27381 Old US 41, downtown Bonita Springs
- >>Cost: \$20
- >>Information: Call (239) 513-8600 or go to www.Stage88.com

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