

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Fink You Thought You Knew

Sylvie · Wednesday, December 5th, 2018

I would have loved to give *Finks*, at Rogue Machine, a longer and perhaps more detailed review, but the play — and to a lesser degree the production — is a bit of a muddle. The intentions are commendable, but good intentions do not a play make. It's not that the play isn't well written. It is written with an abundance of conviction. But it rushes by so fast that we can't always hear all that it yearns to tell us...

Written by Joe Gilford, whose parents were blacklisted during the nightmarish House Un-American Activities Committee hearings (1948 and into the late 50s, early 60s), *Finks* is a reasonable companion piece running in repertory with *Oppenheimer*, the other current and powerfully political Rogue Machine production. Both plays focus on a time when the world changed in big, bad ways. As Rogue Artistic Director John Perrin Flynn put it in a program note, the plays were chosen to run in rep together "because we think they speak to one another and very much to the time in which we live." Note the present tense (in both senses of the word).

Directed by Michael Pressman (also the son of a blacklisted father, David Pressman), *Finks* is only mildly fictionalized. The hearings, with their shameless persecution of presumed American communists, forced friends to squeal on friends by naming names — or not. One way or the other, lives and careers were wrecked, resisters went to jail, exile or both, and panic and penury prevailed. *Finks* aims to remind us that anything can happen at any time when the world and, closer to home, the American political climate chooses to embrace amorality in the name of national security. Because nothing that is morally wrong can be politically right — not my words, but a wiser somebody's.



Vanessa Claire Stewart & Adam Lebowitz-Lockard in *Finks* at Rogue Machine Theatre.

From a dramaturgical perspective, the problem is that, in his closeness to the subject and his eagerness to do it justice, Gilford has stuffed the play with too many characters. A reminder here that the play is not new and was garlanded with awards when it was performed in New York. Nevertheless, the first act in particular jumps from one character to the next without much of a proper introduction. Some cast members take on many more than a single role, only adding to the confusion. By the second act, when we're better acquainted, we can follow the descent of too many people into the special hell of having to decide between two terrible choices: to fink or not to fink.

The very fine French Stewart is our protagonist as the happy-go-lucky actor/comedian/cabaret entertainer Mickey Dobbs caught in the unfortunate middle of all this. We watch his romance

bloom with Natalie Metzler (Vanessa Claire Stewart), a bold and much more defiant resister than Mickey ever dreamed of being. But marriage and a baby follow, as do more celebrity finks with very loose tongues. So the choices narrow and the screws tighten.

“All I ever wanted to be is an entertainer,” cries out a distraught Mickey, for whom the price of morality is a much higher one than he wants to pay, even as he pays it. His wife, the stronger Natalie, keeps reminding him that things will work out in the end. And, of course, they do.

But how well? How soon? And for whom?



l-r, French Stewart & Vanessa Claire Stewart in *Finks* at Rogue Machine Theatre.

That’s the crux. How much glass has to break and how much dignity surrendered for this dark and dubious future? A whole heckuva lot, as we note in the torment of their friend, dancer Bobby Gerard (a heartbreaking Adam Lebowitz-Lockard) and in their own dismay and disarray.



Adam Lebowitz-Lockard & Pressman’s direction is at the mercy of the overdeveloped script Vanessa Claire Stewart in *Finks* at and therefore struggles with the built-in problems of the first act Rogue Machine Theatre.

that he can’t entirely overcome. As usual, the acting at Rogue Machine is solid, and the unobtrusive but constant presence at the piano of music director Richard Levinson as The Piano Man Dickie Lewis, is a welcome thread. It relieves tensions, facilitates transitions, and keeps things relentlessly moving forward.

Stephanie Kerley Schwartz’s set and Halei Parker’s costumes are serviceable given the shared space. What matters most here is the politics, and if the politics do not emerge guns blazing, we get the message well enough.

Top image: French Stewart center at the mic, and the cast of Finks at Rogue Machine Theatre.

Photos by John Perrin Flynn.

WHAT: *Finks*

WHERE: Rogue Machine Theatre at the Electric Lodge, 1416 Electric Ave., Venice CA 90291.

WHEN: Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 3pm; Sundays, 7pm. Ends Dec. 30. The 12/8 performance will be at 8pm. No performance on 12/21.

HOW: Tickets: \$40, available online at www.roguemachinetheatre.com or call **855.585.5185** Pay-What-You-Can performance on 12/7 has a \$10 minimum; no advance sales; tickets can be purchased at the box office starting one hour before performance. Availability is limited. First-come, first-served.

PARKING: Limited free parking in lot. Or street parking.

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