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Inventive Direction in Robber Bridegroom and Royale

David Sheward · Wednesday, March 23rd, 2016

Inventive direction and design enliven two Off-Broadway productions, providing a pair of exciting evenings in the theater. Alex Timbers has helmed such unexpected and creative events as *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, *Peter and the Star Catcher* and *Here Lies Love*. His latest blazing staging is a revival of the cult musical *The Robber Bridegroom* for the Roundabout Theatre Company at their Off-Broadway Laura Pels Theatre. Based on a fanciful Eudora Welty novella, this charming show had brief runs on Broadway in 1974 and 1975 and is chiefly remembered because Barry Bostwick had an unexpected Tony win for Best Actor in the title role for the second production.



Ahna O'Reilly and Steven Pasquale in *The Robber Bridegroom*
Credit: Joan Marcus

The country-and-western-flavored score by Robert Waldman and Alfred Uhry and fairy-tale book by Uhry provide the ideal springboard for a festive backwoods hoedown. Severed heads, magical potions, swapped bodies, and disguises all figure in the storybook plot. The enthusiastic cast play birds, sit on audience members' laps, and generally have a rip-roaring good time as they tell the story of Jamie Lockhart, gentleman thief in mystical 18th century Mississippi. Donyale Werle's homey juke joint of a set, Jake DeGroot and Jeff Croiter's jamboree lighting, and Emily Rebholz's fun period costumes provide just the right atmosphere of foot-stomping pleasure.

Steven Pasquale is a swoon-worthy rogue as the dashing Jamie and Ahna O'Reilly combines sass and sweetness as his lady love Rosamund, but the biggest thief is Leslie Kritzer as Rosamund's wicked stepmother Salome. With nasty asides to the audience, fearless pratfalls, and delightful devilishness, Kritzer steals this *Robber*. Andrew Durand as a luckless thug and Greg Hildreth as Salome's slow-witted henchman also deserve mention.



Khris Davis, McKinley Belcher III, and Clarke Peters in *The Royale*
Credit: T. Charles Erickson

Like *Timbers*, Rachel Chavkin has directed some dazzling productions, including *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812*, the dinner-theater adaptation of a segment of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, due on Broadway next season. She manages to create startling theatrical equivalents of boxing matches in Marco Ramirez's *The Royale*, at Lincoln Center's Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre. Loosely based on the real-life career of Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight champion, the play considers the intersection of racism and sports as Jay, the Johnson figure, prepares to take on the reigning white titleholder in the early 20th century. Like his successor Muhammad Ali, Jay is cocky, brash, and unstoppable, which enrages white America enough to retaliate against random African-Americans. A visit from Jay's frightened sister Nina causes him to hesitate in his quest for the prize.

Johnson also serves as the inspiration for the 1968 play *The Great White Hope* which made a star of James Earl Jones and delivered a more complex mosaic of its subject and the country he challenged. Ramirez's take is simpler and more obvious than the earlier work. You can see the playwright's hand in the forced interactions. But Chavkin's boldly daring direction of the opening and closing pugilistic encounters (along with exciting lighting of Austin R. Smith) grab your attention with their intricate choreography, hand-clapping punctuation, and ingenious use of the ropes and metal rods of the boxing ring to suggest body blows. However, the scenes in the middle feel clichéd and overly familiar.

The magnificent cast includes Khris Davis' cyclonic Jay, John Lavelle's bombastic promoter, Clarke Peters' wily trainer, McKinley Belcher III's earnest sparring partner, and Montego Glover's powerful Nina. They help make *The Royale* a solid bout, but it's still not quite a knockout.

The Robber Bridegroom: March 13—May 29. Roundabout Theatre Company at the Laura Pels Theatre at Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for the Theatre, 111 W. 46th St., NYC. TUE.—Sat., 7:30 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission; \$99—\$109; (212) 719-1300 or

www.roundabouttheatre.org.

The Royale: March 7—May 1. Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre at Lincoln Center, 150 W. 65th St., NYC. Tue.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. \$77—\$87; Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission; (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

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