

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Not Ready For Prime Time

Sylvie · Wednesday, February 19th, 2020

Full disclosure: I'm a couple of generations removed from that of the creators of the Vampire Cowboys' *Revenge Song* now rattling rafters and preconceptions in the Gil Cates Theatre of The Geffen Playhouse. This over the top swashbuckler dismembers and reassembles the adventurous life of Julie d'Aubigny, an obscure 17th century gender-bending French warrior-woman, in an extreme updating that drags her kicking and screaming into the 21st century.

As a woman, D'Aubigny craved independence, moved and fought like a man, loved whoever happened to be near, female or male, and died in 1707, aged "about 33," no doubt from exhaustion.



I-r, Margaret Odette & Amy Kim Waschke in *Revenge Song* at The Geffen Playhouse.

Adventurousness in the theatre is premium. It stirs the pot. And *Revenge Song*'s playwright, Qui Nguyen, has more than proved that his skewed sense of humor is spicy theatrical seasoning. *Vietgone*, a pixilated comedy about his parents' addled romance in a U.S. refugee camp is proof that anything works in the theatre if it's well done. But *Revenge Song* from this outlier New York company is a different dish.



i.r, Tom Myers, Margaret Odette, Beth Hawkes & Noshir Dalal in *Revenge Song* at The Geffen Playhouse.

Playwright Nguyen and *Revenge*'s director, Robert Ross Parker, are the founding co-directors of Vampire Cowboys. It's their sandbox, so they can do in it whatever they want. By their own assessment, they like pushing boundaries and dabbling in wacky-giggly Marvel comic stuff for the stage. It appeals to them and to their many New York fans. And that's fine.

The problem here is not with this idea, but with context and implementation. As a major L.A. venue, the Gil Cates house at the Geffen should deliver something more fully realized than the overwrought, undercooked shambles that *Revenge Song* still is. The Geffen does, after all, have a smaller house in the building in which to handle the more experimental stuff.



Margaret Odette & Noshir Dalal in *Revenge Song*, with Amy Kim Waschke in the background at The Geffen Playhouse.

It seems as if Nguyen and Parker got so carried away with their good idea that they forgot all about that sort of thing. Tossing out 2020 ultra-colloquial and four-letter American slang in wildly divergent French or mock-French accents is fun for ten minutes. Jokes about body parts and what you can do *with* and *to* them gets and deserves the tee-hee reaction of 13-year-olds. We're not asking for prudish or for Quentin Tarantino. We're asking for a horse we can ride to the finish. The horse on Nick Francone's perfectly functional set is prophetically stationary. Let's add that Francone's set also benefits from nifty projections by Kaitlyn Pietras and Jason H. Thompson.

If there's a plan to it all, it's raffishly self-indulgent. *Revenge Song*'s plot convolutions don't clarify matters either. The giddy creators just keep piling stuff on. Jessica Shay's super-inventive, tacky-on-purpose costumes are surely the best thing in it, while the addition of David Valentine's puppets is merely superfluous. More is just more, guys, when it's extraneous or only just more of the same.

All of this is adolescent on purpose, a kind of student effort that flew off the rails. This comedy's closest relative, *Spamalot*, had plenty of silliness too, but it understood timing and pauses. It knew where and, more important, when to draw the line. The intricate fight scenes in *Revenge*, with flailing knives, spears or whatever-is-handy, are clumsy to embarrassing — and no, not on purpose.

The grasp just eludes the reach.



Tom Myers in *Revenge Song* at the Geffen Theatre.

Margaret Odette's Julie expends plenty of energy vindicating her hitherto-unheard-of right to live life as she chooses (this is 1697, remember). The real Julie d'Aubigny might have counseled Odette that a more nuanced, less furious and raw performance would serve the role better. But *mon Dieu*, this is not a show that prizes subtlety.

Those French accents are part of the joke, but they're too often simply hard to decipher, especially when spoken by Amy Kim Waschke as Mme. De Senneterre, our guide (or Madam?) for much of the evening. Her French improves dramatically when she morphs into Marie, one of our Julie's paramours. Eugene Young is a pleasing Albert, Julie's some time lover and loyal best friend, depending on mood and opportunity. Tom Myers, Noshir Dalal and Beth Hawkes come through commendably in a variety of other wacky roles.



l-r, Beth Hawkes & Margaret Odette in *Revenge Song* at The Geffen Playhouse.

To be fair, there was no mass exodus at the intermission on the night I attended. Most of the mostly-over-40 audience came back, responding at the end with healthy if not riotous applause.

In case I haven't made it quite clear, what you get is a fraternity romp gone haywire. But the Geffen is not a sandbox or a petri dish, not at those ticket prices. How about a finished product?

Top image: l-r, Tom Myers, Eugene Young & Noshir Dalal in Revenge Song at The Geffen Playhouse.

Photos by Jeff Lorch

WHAT: *Revenge Song*, A Vampire Cowboys Creation

WHERE: Geffen Playhouse, Gil Cates Theatre, 10886 Le Conte Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90024.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 3 & 8pm; Sundays, 2 & 8pm. Ends March 8.

HOW: Tickets \$30-\$120 (subject to change), available at the Geffen Box Office, online at www.geffenplayhouse.org or by phone at 310.208.5454. Fees may apply.

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