



KIND OF BLUES The cast of *Robert Johnson* learns the Devil's in the details.

Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil

By Bill Harris. Dir. Ron OJ Parson. With ensemble cast. eta Creative Arts Foundation, Inc. (see Resident theaters).

On opening night, there was a small technical glitch: The lights went down just a smidge early at the end of the first act. A perfectly forgivable flaw—if it didn't bespeak bigger problems. After all, this is a play about the last day in the life of Robert Johnson, the legendary bluesman reputed to have sold his soul to the devil. It's reasonable to expect some tension and suspense. How will Johnson meet his end? Will he be murdered by the mysterious white man who's been tracking him, or the husband of his latest paramour? Or will Lucifer return to claim his due? Yet until the lights came up for intermission, it

wasn't clear that the act was over.

That same sense of aimless meandering marks the production as a whole. Harris's strangely undramatic script is largely to blame. Relying on overblown poetic asides and ham-fisted self-declarations, Harris fails to generate tension and throws pacing to the wind. And couldn't he find a better device for underscoring the native brilliance of Johnson's achievement than by creating an absurd straw man, the bluesman's conflicted white admirer who alternately spouts Shakespeare, beats his breast in liberal guilt and belittles the whole of African-American culture? The cast struggles with the material, working hard to infuse its exchanges with a sense of lived experience. The only one who truly succeeds is Jones, as the blind seer and pianist, whose wit and charisma rise above the material. —*Kay Daly*

Barefoot in the Park

By Neil Simon. Dir. Justin Amelio. With Aubrey Brown, Jim Meade, Tori Ullrich, Russ Morgan, Matt Dyson. Easy Street Players at the Athenaeum Theatre (see Fringe & storefront).

Simon's 1963 comedy, about a pair of newlyweds who don't know each other as well as they think they do, plays like a rough draft of a *Dharma & Greg* episode, but without the nuance. Conservative lawyer Paul (Meade) and exuberant, optimistic Corie (Brown) have been married six days when they move from their honeymoon suite into their new fifth-floor walk-up. The first few days put a strain on their fledgling marriage as they adjust to sharing the small, run-down apartment and deal with interference from Corie's widowed mother (Ullrich) and their eccentric upstairs neighbor (Morgan).

Brown and Meade show the potential for charm early on, but they and their fellow actors have been directed to play everything loud and broad from the get-go. By the time they reach the blow-up argument in the third act, we don't feel empathy, just fatigue from being shouted at for so long. In the Athenaeum's tiny studio space, all that yelling rattles our nerves as much as it does the shaky set, which threatens to fall down every time a door is slammed.

The show's message, on the surface, is that love conquers all, love requires sacrifice, the course of true

love never did run smooth and the like. What comes across most clearly in the jokes, however, is fear of the city. The characters freak out because their apartment is a shithole, their neighbors have ethnic names and they go out to eat unfamiliar food. This is a play that panders to our collective suburban mom. —*Kris Vire*

Seats for a song

Discounted tickets are available for same-day and advance performances at **Hot Tix**, inside the Chicago Tourism Center at 72 E Randolph St, a half-block west of Millennium Park. Hours are Tue–Sat 10am–6pm and Sun noon–5pm. Other Hot Tix locations: Water Works Visitor Center, 163 E Pearson St (Tue–Fri 10am–6pm; Sat 10am–5pm; Sun noon–5pm); North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, 9501 Skokie Blvd in Skokie (same hours as Water Works); plus all four Chicago Tower Records locations. Hot Tix is a service provided by the League of Chicago Theatres.

Check with theaters for rush tickets—discounted tickets available at the box office one hour before performance.

Touring shows

IF YOU WANT TO BE LISTED

Submit information by mail, e-mail (theater@timeoutchicago.com) or fax (312-924-9350) to **Christopher Piatt**. Include details of show, dates, times, address of venue with cross streets, nearest El station and bus routes, telephone number and admission price, if any. **Deadline is 9am Monday, ten days before publication date.** Incomplete submissions will not be included, and submission does not guarantee inclusion. Listings are free but, as space is limited, inclusion is not guaranteed.

►=Reviewed in this issue

★=Recommended

♫=Musical or song-based play

◆=\$20 or less

★♫ The Lion King

Cadillac Palace Theatre, 151 W Randolph St at LaSalle St (312-902-1400). El: Brown, Green, Purple (rush hrs), Orange, Blue to Clark/Lake; Red to Washington. \$21–\$85. Wed 2, 7:30pm; Thu 7:30pm; Fri, Sat 8pm; Sun 1, 6:30pm. 2hrs 45mins. One intermission. Through Sept 4. The *Lion King* not only meets but joyously exceeds the hype. With her beautifully crafted puppets and masks, constantly inventive Julie Taymor forges a wow factor that's off the charts. Elton John's schmaltzy tunes have been embellished with African sounds, and casting most roles with black actors bypasses the potential Disneyesque absurdity of seeing white people singing and dancing in Africa. If there's a show worth coughing up an inordinate sum to see, this is it. —*Novid Parsi*

Resident companies

HOW TO USE THIS SECTION

Ticket information: For discount tickets, see "Seats for a song". Rush tickets and student discounts are available for many of the listed theaters. **Call box office numbers for more information.** Where two phone numbers are listed, the first is the direct box office line, and the second is the ticket agency.

★ All Through the Night

Chicago Jewish Theatre at Red Hen Productions, 5123 N Clark St at Winona St (773-728-0599). El: Red to Berwyn. Bus: 22 Clark (24 hrs), 92 Foster. \$25. Thu, Sat 8pm; Sun 2, 7pm. 2hrs 30mins. One intermission. Through Sun 10. Shirley Lauro's collage of the experiences of gentile women in Nazi Germany, constructed from interviews and oral histories, may be the last original take on the Holocaust. Director Greg Kolack coaxes strong, layered performances from his cast of five women. Though the dialogue is occasionally clunky, the play is touching, funny and frightening. —*Kris Vire*

Arms and the Man

Writers' Theatre, 325 Tudor Ct, Glencoe (847-242-6000). Metra: Union Pacific N. \$45–\$55. Tue–Fri 8pm; Sat 5, 8pm; Sun 2:30, 6pm. 2hrs 15mins. One intermission. Through Jul 24. While a war rages, a wealthy family's daughter receives a late-night visit from a soldier from the other side, who punctures her hot-air ideals about love and war. Director William Brown gives Shaw the standard genteel treatment and dilutes the concentrated wit with broad humor. If these characters are rendered all surface, Shaw's point about the depth beneath the surface doesn't take. —*Novid Parsi*

DON'T MISS!

Queen Lucia



The Bad Seed: The Musical

(*Cornservatory at Bailiwick Arts Center; see Fringe & storefront*) Fringe drag mainstays Tiff and Mom (of Cornservatory fame) bring back their roast of the inexplicably campy 1956 movie thriller.

Book of Days

(*Steep Theatre; see Fringe & storefront*) Lanford Wilson's story of a murder in a small Midwestern town (and its churchgoing residents who look the other way) gets a thorough, thoughtful treatment from Steep.

Queen Lucia

(*Lifeline Theatre; see Resident*

companies) Genuine musical romps are few and far between, but this bumptious adaptation of E.F. Benson's stories of provincial English society delivers.

The People vs. Friar Laurence, The Man Who Killed Romeo and Juliet

(*Second City Theatricals and Chicago Shakespeare Theater at Chicago Shakespeare; see Resident companies*) There's little not to like about this smart/stupid musical send-up of everything the Bard ever wrote. And it's hard to argue with an R&J in which the Friar and the nurse are played by the same actor.