

2 playwrights have the Devil of a time

By ERNEST ALBRECHT
Home News theater critic

It is difficult to imagine a more curious evening of theater than the one being offered by the Lincoln Center Theater company under the collective title "Oh, Hell." It is not just the material that is so curious, but the people involved as well.

The evening opens with a long epic poem that narrates, as its title suggests, the relationship between "The Devil and Billy Markham." It is delivered by ex-pop artist and composer Dennis Locorriere, whose group Dr. Hook once scored with such hits as "When You're in Love With a Beautiful Woman." Shel Silverstein, the playwright, is the author of many songs, poems and children's books.

Although the episodic encounters between Billy Markham, a rather stupid gambler, and the Devil are amusing, the length of the piece does present some problems. Like other poems of the genre, this one maintains an unvarying rhyme scheme, which after about a half hour becomes not only predictable but numbing. To make matters worse, Locorriere has a very distinctive voice, which may be intriguing on a 3- to 4-minute record, but becomes monotonous after a long time, and "The Devil and Billy Markham" runs on for about 60 minutes. The problem is that he has almost no range, and the whiskey soaked whisper soon begins to wear thin.

The second half of the evening is taken up with "Bobby Gould in Hell" a play by David Mamet which more or less pursues the same theme as the Silverstein poem: Who goes to hell and why. Bobby Gould, played by Treat Williams in a benign and low-keyed performance, questions the Devil, played by W.H. Macy, with appropriate bravura as to why he is there. He refuses to admit that he

was a bad person.

Eventually an old girl friend is summoned to provide evidence of Bobby's lack of good will. In the person of Felicity Huffman, the girl manages to suggest that there may indeed have been extenuating circumstances involved in the way Bobby treated her. In fact the only way the Devil can finally get rid of her is through a classic bit of hocus pocus.

There really isn't much point to all this beyond having a good time and a few laughs, which the playwright and director Gregory Mosher provide in good measure. One of the biggest laughs comes from a sight gag. Bobby's interrogation takes place in a book-lined, leather-upholstered and aggressively masculine study. When Bobby tries to leave, he pulls open a set of double doors and is smacked in the face with all the fire and brimstone, weeping and wailing one associates with hell.

The production is laced with similar bits of pyrotechnics throughout, and they always provide a chuckle or two. Most of the other laughs come from Macy's interpretation of the Devil as a cross between a suburban sportsman and a prosecuting attorney. He comes complete with a comically nebish sidekick, played with reticent charm by Steven Goldstein.

"Oh, Hell" thus provides a means of laughing in the face of our worse fears, and while it may be taxing at times, it is ultimately amusing.

OH, HELL
An evening of two one-act plays by Shel Silverstein and David Mamet, directed by Gregory Mosher for the Lincoln Center Theater at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater, Lincoln Center, New York City. For reservations and information call (212) 239-6200.

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