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Music Hall

February 9, 2015 Tom Williams

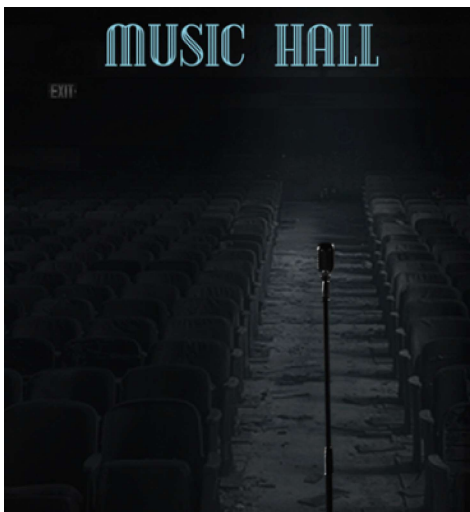
By Jean-Luc Lagarce

Directed by Zeljko Djukic

Produced by TUTA Theatre Chicago

Skillful Performance about Small Town French Vaudeville Blues

Since moving to Chicago, I've seen enough good theatre to develop feelings of local pride, despite not having been here for that long. Therefore, I am happy that TUTA is putting on the American debut of Jean-Luc Lagarce's 1988 play *Music Hall*, prior to the production's transfer to an off-Broadway theatre in New York. The production perfectly serves TUTA's mission of introducing Americans to European playwrights they might not have known before, and utilizes the finest talent in rendering Lagarce's characters.



The performance begins with a clown routine by the characters known only as First Boy and Second Boy, Michael Doonan and Darren Hill. Though older than boys, they are both youthfully exuberant. After some silent movie sort of antics with the curtain, they mysteriously find a pair of women's shoes on the floor, and are reminded of their former owner. A third actor, Jeffrey Binder, joins them onstage. He too, remembers the Artiste, the leader of their old troupe of entertainers. In their reminiscing, he becomes her, and the Artiste and her two Boys relive their time together as vaudeville performers in the French countryside.

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This performance, the Artiste insists, is not a story. It is a song and dance revue, and that is enough. In truth, it is a story, but one that already happened many times as different boys joined and abandoned the Artiste. The

playing space, by Natasha Djukic, who also designed the costumes, is nothing more than a boarded floor, mirrors and ballet barres along the walls, an entrance up center stage, a curtain, and a stool. It is the sort of venue the Artiste and company always perform in, except they are usually in grey, lifeless little towns with hardly any native culture. For more than fifteen years, she tells us, she has made do, bribing stage managers to let her use her stool despite its lack of flame retardant, and often performing to empty houses. The Boys elaborate and correct her and each other. They were not there for the beginning of her wanderings, and will not stay until the end. But they all impacted each other.

It's a hard way to live. Not just because of the financial strain, but the emotional battering the performers took from the smirking, heckling, thrown beer bottles, when anybody



showed interest at all. Binder is wonderful. Though playing a female character without a wig, he is absolutely convincing as the Artiste, who practices her seductive smile so that it looks effortless. She is the most tortured soul of the three, but brave and more than a little egotistical. She knows the venue staff do mocking impressions of her declamatory speaking style and the way she interrupts herself to offer more examples and related points, all of which contribute eventually to conveying the full picture of her experience, but she weathers it bravely. However, there is also a reservoir of anger deep within her, which Binder summons at times of raw intensity.

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Doonan and Hill, likewise, force themselves to endure the miseries of itinerant performers who travel on foot, although with more sadness and wistfulness than anger. Though they are not bound to her except emotionally, it is likely any other company they would join would have similar circumstances, if there are even any others like theirs still around.

Besides the riveting dramatic acting, *Music Hall* provides us with a few of the Artiste's variety acts. She and her Boys do some amusing dancing to Aileen McGroddy's choreography, and their singing and Doonan's harmonica provide a folksy underscore to their memories. Binder is as graceful as ever doing a fan dance, and at one point there is a surprising genre-crossing musical remix. In the short time the show runs, it creates an emotional state that is melancholy, but not without humor. TUTA did a Lagarce play years ago, but for many this will likely be their first opportunity to see the playwright's work. Don't miss it. If these characters finally get the recognition they deserve, we may hope to see many more fine examples of this slightly unusual but deeply compelling theatre.

Highly Recommended

Jacob Davis

3jacob.davis@gmail.com

Reviewed February 6, 2015

Listen to my interview with Zeljko Djukic and Jeffrey Binder [here](#).

For more information, see *Music Hall's* page on [Theatre in Chicago](#).

Playing at The Den Theatre, 1333 N. Milwaukee, Chicago. For tickets, call 1-800-838-3006 or visit <http://www.tutato.com/page/home>. Tickets are \$25-40 with discounts for seniors and students. Plays Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 7:30 pm and Sundays at 3:00 pm through March 8. Running time is seventy minutes with no intermission.

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