

# REVIEW: 'Music Hall' by TUTA Theatre Company



Anthony La Penna photo



By **Chris Jones**  
Chicago Tribune

SHARE THIS



At TUTA, a play about the players and the dark places they go.

FEBRUARY 10, 2015, 4:29 PM

**Z**eljko Djukic, the capable founding artistic director of the avant-garde Chicago company known as TUTA Theatre Chicago, has been off on a Fulbright Scholarship. He has been missed. But he's back with directorial vengeance — if that's the right descriptor for a soupcon of l'avant garde Francais — with a remarkable 80-minute show at the Den Theatre called “Music Hall.”

This is an unusual attraction for several reasons. One rarely climbs to the second floor of the Den Theater in Wicker Park to find an actor with credits in the Broadway companies of “The Lion King” and “Mary Poppins” on

his resume, but then, if Nathan Lane can take time out to do Eugene O'Neill, there is no reason why Jeff Binder cannot essay the central role in a strange and dark little play by Jean-Luc Lagarce in a dusty Chicago studio.

You're forgiven if you've never heard of that name. Lagarce, who died of AIDS in 1995 at age 38, is a relatively big deal in Parisian theatrical circles but rarely produced in the United States. In New York to date, his works mostly have been met with critical bewilderment.

In Chicago, I've seen two of his other dramas, "Rules for Good Manners in the Modern World" and "It's Only the End of the World." Not coincidentally, both were directed by Djukic. Plans already have been made to take this very fine production of "Music Hall" to New York's 59E59 Theaters. That plan, and TUTA's re-embrace of Equity producing, presumably explains the presence of Binder, who works here with Michael Doonan and Darren Hill.

In the great Beckettian tradition of these things, "Music Hall" is very meta. It is about an actress, played by Binder (previous productions have cast a female in this role), who is on some kind of ungodly, depressing tour of the provinces with a couple of fellow performers, acolytes and foils (that would be where Doonan and Hill come in, and stay). It is one of the theater's great paradoxes of the theater, of course, that success means being trapped in a role for a long period, whereas to be released from such nightly purgatory represents failure.

That is certainly a theme of "Music Hall," which also functions as an admiring piece about the actor's nightly grind and an exploration of the quotidian hell that is doing the same thing, night after night.

Binder's character is a cynic — "Mustn't hope for much from the box-office; mustn't hope for much applause" —

vation was going to lift any actor from his stupor, for the greater glory," is the way The Artiste steals, all the time wondering whether the aforementioned greater glory actually exists. There is discussion of the attraction of another career "with more money and less despair."

But although many of the venues in which the artiste finds him/herself feature "a laughable distance between the back curtain and the stool downstage," he/she keeps on keeping on. It's a piece that brings to mind several other shows, ranging from "I Am My Own Wife" (Binder and Jefferson Mays have commonalities) to "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" to "Waiting for Godot." Binder goes to some dark spots in service of the art.

Don't expect sizzling theatrics, or broiling anything, really. It's a weird, intentionally tawdry piece. In translation, to boot.

This is a funny, knowing show. I suspect the many actors in this town will grasp immediately what this play is saying, and where these tightly focused performers are heading, with their collective eye "fixed on that black hole where there is nobody."

Well, hardly anybody. Sunday in Wicker Park, don't cha' know.

[cjones5@tribune.com](mailto:cjones5@tribune.com)

*Twitter@ChrisJonesTrib*

### **3.5 STARS**

**When:** Through March 8

**Where:** The Den Theatre, 1333 N. Milwaukee Ave.

**Running time:** 1 hour, 20 minutes

**Tickets:** \$25-\$40 at 800-938-3006 or **[brownpapertickets.com](http://brownpapertickets.com)**

Copyright © 2017, Chicago Tribune

**This article is related to:** [Mary Poppins \(musical\)](#)

---

EAT THIS, DRINK THIS

#### **101 OF THE BEST FOODS AND DRINKS TO TRY IN CHICAGO NOW**

Chicago Tribune staff pick 101 of the best foods in Chicago, from fried chicken nachos with the Honey Butter touch to a spicy, coconuty and cheekily named tequila cocktail to silky thin crepes with goat cheese, honey and black figs, a treasure you'll find at Chicago's first Kurdish restaurant.

---