

Theater Review: Our Sins, Joys Are Exposed in Rodez's 'The Big Funk'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on June 26, 2010 - 3:38am

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CHICAGO – There are moments of true clarity in John Patrick Shanley's "The Big Funk," presented by Rodez Productions at the Red Tape Theater in Chicago. Characters who find themselves trapped in a metaphoric morass work through the issues that bind them, and expose themselves to a bigger sense of life's intention.



Play Rating: **4.0/5.0**

Shanley, most notable for his Oscar-winning screenplay of "Moonstruck" (1987) and the screen adaptation of his stageplay "Doubt" (2008), was in mid-career form when he wrote The Big Funk, first produced in 1990. Rodez Productions gives it a simple yet sumptuous rendering, capturing all the angst and exposure, while preserving its powerful message.



Soul Feeding: Paul Krick as Austin, Allie Long as Jill, Jay Reed as Omar and Tuckie White as Fifi in 'The Big Funk'
Photo credit: Rodez Productions

The play opens by introducing the four main characters. Jill (Allie Long) is an optimist who has trouble with men, simply by practicing her innocence. Fifi (Tuckie White) is a pragmatist, and yet is oddly mannered. She is best described as June Cleaver on Ritalin. Omar (Jay Reed) is a former knife thrower angry at the world – not a good combo – and group instigator. He is married to Fifi, and they are expecting twins (when are they due? Tomorrow afternoon.) And finally there is Austin (Paul Krick), a seeker who believes in illuminating the reasons behind the Big Funk.

After a quick interaction between Austin, Omar and Fifi, the focus is on Jill, as she approaches a first date with Gregory (Adam El-Sharkawi). Her naivete still shines, but this time the intrigue involves Gregory's need to slather Jill with Vasoline. She capitulates, good sport that she is (or maybe good sport she seeks) and ends up greasy and alone. Austin finds her later in a bar, and offers to take her to his apartment to clean up.

What might have been an exploitative moment becomes one of the more compelling scenes in the play. Austin bathes Jill, in a full bath setting, and lathers her further with prose that begins a self ritualistic cleansing. With both characters refreshed and alive, Austin asks Jill to go to a dinner party at Omar and Fifi's.

The second act is that entire meal, where heroes are born, scores are settled and a risky piece of exposition by Austin allows everyone to lighten up.



Circles in the Sand: Tuckie White in 'The Big Funk'
Photo credit: Rodez Productions

This is a slightly surreal take on modern angst, with the characters more symbolic than real. But the earnest projection of the actors create a blithe atmosphere that becomes more emotional as the meaning unfolds. The discomfort and negative energy are on display – especially effective in the coating of Jill in Vasoline by the passive-aggressive Gregory – and dissolves into a resolute redemption that is freeing for both the actors and the audience.

All of the actors are in top form, with Paul Krick as Austin leading the way. He has the bravest moment on stage and delivers with a forthrightness that belies the presence. Allie Long as Jill plays befuddlement very well and her bath scene creates a perfect transition for the character. Jay Reed's Omar is full of sound and fury, and the actor allows him to signify more than nothing. The flame-haired Tuckie White as Fifi spins a housewife satire into a wonderland. And the director, Rani Blair-O'Brien, has done a great job corralling these performances and gets the upper register from the meta-psychic storage of each actor.

The narrative takes a little time to wind up, but the bath scene takes care of all the puttering it took to get there. The dinner sequence flashes like lightning, and as the foursome endures they communicate the artistic philosophy right through themselves to the observers. It is the theater equivalent of a warm and necessary slap in the face.

The stage is set in the "round," and the players use the whole space appropriately. Art Design, by Josh Artega, is simple and candid. The dinner scene of Act Two unfolds under a canopy of lights, the building of which was almost as fascinating as the play around it. This is a perfect example of creative minds merging with resourceful intention.

The Big Funk reminds us that help is always on the way, either through a hot bath, dinner with friends or a person willing to go all the way to deliver a point of salvation. John Patrick Shanley and Rodez Productions administer a much needed respite from the funky real world.

"The Big Funk," by John Patrick Shanley, is presented by Rodez Productions at the Red Tape Theater at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, 621 W. Belmont Ave., Chicago, Thursday-Sunday, through July 10th. Featuring Allie Long, Tuckie White, Jay Reed, Paul Krick and Adam El-Sharkawi, directed by Rani Blair-O'Brien [Click here for more information.](#) [15]

By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [17]
Senior Staff Writer



[16]

HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [16]

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