Theater Review: Real Chicago in Timeline Theatre’s ‘The Front Page’

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on April 25, 2011 - 4:45pm

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CHICAGO – The popular image of the newspaper reporter screaming into the phone with a hot scoop most likely began with the popular and oft-produced stageplay, “The Front Page.” Timeline Theatre of Chicago presents an essential restaging of the classic with superior attention to period detail.



Play Rating: **4.0/5.0**

This is also a true blood Chicago story, staged originally in 1928 and written by two former reporters in the Windy City, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. The stink of politics, corruption of the legal system and the men who reported on these topics permeate the atmosphere of the serio-comedy, set in the days when Chicago had nine circulating newspapers, including the now defunct Daily News and the still surviving Tribune.

The story opens in the press room of the municipal courtroom building, where the denizens of the various Chicago newspapers are killing time before covering an impending execution. The accused, Earl Williams (Rob Fagin), is being sent to the gallows because he has killed an African American policeman. The Mayor (Rob Riley) and the City Sheriff (Bill McGough) are anxious for the death sentence to be completed – an election is coming up.

Amid the atmosphere of smoke and poker playing, Hildy Johnson (PJ Powers) enters. He is a reporter, dressed to the nines, announcing to his colleagues that he has just quit the newspaper game. He is getting married and moving to New York City. This is causing persistent calls from his assignment editor, Walter Burns (Terry Hamilton), demanding that Johnson cover the hanging. But Hildy won’t be swayed, that is, until the accused Earl Williams escapes from jail.



The City Desk: PJ Powers as Hildy Johnson and Terry Hamilton as Walter Burns in Timeline Theatre's 'The Front Page'
Photo credit: Timeline Theatre

As the press room erupts surrounding the potential biggest story of the year, Hildy is left to explain to his fiancé Peggy (Bridgette Pechman Claro) that he won't be making the evening train with her. Further complicating matters is the escaped convict himself, who seeks sanctuary in the press room and is aided by Hildy and Walter Burns, hoping to keep a lid on the story before the others find out.

This is precisely staged, with detail that is almost down to the smell of the place. The presentation is in the round, with the audience on top of the action. And there is loads of drama, including reporters barking into 1920s phones, running in and out of the room chasing the next lead. It is barely controlled chaos, indicative of the camaraderie and competition of that particular newspaper era.

The ensemble of newspaper reporters (Don Blair, Mike McNamara, Loren Lazerine, Michael Kingston, Larry Baldacci, Mark Richard and Alex Goodrich) create distinct personalities that handle the language and attitudes of the 1928 atmosphere like they've stepped out of a time machine. Their crude machinations belie the "olden days" politeness, with cynical references to sex and politics that would be right at home in today's locker room.

The story itself takes time to build, but the length is only felt in the first act, while Hildy Johnson's story slowly revs up, culminating in the convict escape. PJ Powers, who portrays Johnson, doesn't click completely into his role until he is paired with Terry Hamilton's Walter Burns in the second act. Hamilton takes one of the great roles of American theater and makes it his own, creating a terrific chemistry between he and Powers that feels like both a rivalry and a brotherhood.



Aiding & Abetting: Mechelle Moe as Mollie, Rob Fagin as Earl and PJ Powers in Timeline Theatre's 'The Front Page'
Photo credit: Timeline Theatre

Although the women in the cast are not as prevalent, all three players shine with a nod toward the awareness of the female role in those times. Clarno's quiet fiancé character contrasts sharply with the brash Mollie Malloy (Mechelle Moe), a lady-of-the-evening who practically spits nails, and is a highlight in the couple of stage moments she has. Angela Bullard plays Johnson's potential mother-in-law with all the good comedy associated with that stereotype intact.

Timeline Theatre prides itself in presenting stagecraft that is rooted in history, and director Nick Bowling has accomplished that pride in this production. Don't miss the extensive background displays on Chicago newspaper history that the theatre has set up prior to walking into the stage, because The Front Page practically puts the ink under your fingernails.

"The Front Page" by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, is performed Wednesday through Sunday until June 12th, 2011, at the Timeline Theatre at 615 W. Wellington in Chicago. Featuring Don Blair, Mike McNamara, Loren Lazerine, Michael Kingston, Larry Baldacci, Alex Goodrich, Mark Richard, PJ Powers, Mechelle Moe, Bill McGough, Bridgette Pechman Clarno, Angela Bullard, Rob Riley, Rob Fagin and Terry Hamilton. Directed by Nick Bowling. Click here for tickets and more information. *[15]*

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