

=====

Irv Muchnick reviews "The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity"

Kristoffer Diaz's wonderful Pulitzer Prize-nominated wrestling play, *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity*, had a run at Berkeley's Aurora Theatre, and I got to see the final performance.

The experience had added resonance from my attendance with a couple who did not realize I am Sam Muchnick's nephew -- and for that matter did not know who the hell Sam Muchnick was. The male of the couple, a channel-surfer who occasionally alights on Raw, is impressed by John Cena's presence and mic skills. The female of the couple is a one-time theater support professional who reacted as though she had been parachuted into an alternative universe. Which, of course, she had been.

Since *Chad Deity* is not especially plot-driven, the following summary does not contain what would be called serious spoilers.

Macedonio "The Mace" Guerra (played by Tony Sancho with a superb mix of glibness and angst) is a technically adept wrestler who was not gifted with superstar size or looks -- a bit of an Eddie Guerrero. He therefore hits the glass ceiling at enhancement talent status. But he also profoundly loves the business -- fondly recalling Saturday mornings of WWF television with his brothers in the Bronx in 1986 -- and he is grateful to have found gainful employment with the WWE-type entity called "THE Wrestling."

Rod Gnapp plays the McMahonesque promoter, and doubles as the voiceover ring announcer. The latter uses Howard Finkel cadences, such as "The following contest is scheduled for one fall, with an X time limit."

Truly, all the historical references and rhythms are pitch-perfect, as Diaz rolls out a labor of love with a gloss of social commentary on the wrestling industry's relationship to America's global hegemony, via uneducated and primal appeals to mankind's basest instincts. Mace's rhetorical patter, with frequent asides breaking down the "fourth wall" to the audience, propels at a manic pace what is often rather thin substance. For a writer, this is not easy to pull off, even on Raw, and it is especially hard to frame with intellectual integrity for a full-length theater piece.

Did I mention that *Chad Deity* is riotously funny?

Before the start of the play, in which he would proceed to portray a rotating cast of jobbers with generic gimmicks, Dave Maier warmed up the crowd. Maier was so good that I was sure he was a local indy wrestler. It turns out that he's a respected stage "fight captain"/action choreographer.

Director Jon Tracy fully exploits the the Aurora's tiny space for some dazzling production wrinkles. The set is simply a miniaturized ring, with a stage ramp flanked by projection screens. The screens flash video packages for the wrestlers' entrances, which are dominated by non sequitur bikini babes and kitsch montages. But in addition -- and this was ingenious -- there is

also a ringside "hard camera man," who projects surrealistically filtered footage of live promos in real time.

Speaking of entrances ... The eponymous Deity character, played by Beethovan Oden, is oddly, or maybe appropriately, the least important of the ensemble. Deity offers a dash of Hulk Hogan, a *souçon* of The Rock, with powerfully declaimed but impertinent observations on the magic of capitalism and the American Dream.

Nasser Khan plays Vigneshwar "VP" Paduar, who is ... how to describe him? VP is an ethnic Indian (as in the country of India, not a Native American), endowed with multicultural gab and charisma, and imposing height. (Though Khan, despite some good sneering facials, doesn't really look the part -- they at least should have put lifts in his boots.) The Puerto Rican Mace's brothers discover VP playing basketball and informally wowing the street masses in Brooklyn with extracurricular shtick. When Mace himself encounters VP, he discovers a transcendent all-purpose entertainer who becomes Mace's meal ticket to greater glory -- but as a manager, not as a wrestler.

Psychological and logistical complications ensue, however. That's where I'll stop giving anything away.

The social commentary portion of the proceedings does not involve the familiar Mickey Rourke weebegones; Mace makes quick reference to the real physical beatdowns imposed by years of "fake" wrestling, but that is not the focus of this work. Instead, Mace meditates on ethnic-minority self-esteem, and how that gets folded, spindled, and mutilated through wrestling's ultracommercialized xenophobia. You can't help nodding "yes" and feeling that playwright Diaz is on to something. Remember when the Junkyard Dog, a revered figure of the African American fans of Bill Watts' territory, became a barking and rather embarrassing caricature once he joined the WWF?

And Diaz's observations on how unspecific foreign heel-mongering can get -- right on. Olson-McMahon keeps experimenting, with a gleeful lack of rigor, until he alights on the right scab on the body politic that can be picked in just the right way. (Before he became the Iron Sheik, I recall that Khosrow Vasiri was "the Great Hossein Arab." WWF TV ring announcer Joe McCue used to pronounce it "a-RAB," like a redneck. Unfortunately, Iranians, who are almost all Muslim, are also almost all ethnic Persians, not Arabs.)

Similarly, VP's finisher, a superkick, is first dubbed the KKK ("Koran-Kabballa Kick"), before evolving into the "Sleeper Cell." And poor Mace gets reduced to a Mexican-sombrero-donning, Cuban-cigar-lighting, Chinese-Commie-sympathizing pastiche named Che Chavez Castro.

The only flaw in Chad Deity is, well, drama. This is rollicking material, and at moments it's sociologically insightful as well. But if you're not already a fan, it might not be emotionally compelling. I think Diaz could have used a female character -- not just because women are involved in the industry, all the way up to Stephanie Triple H-McMahon, but also because these guys' contemplations of their masculinity could have benefited from a fresh perspective.

## Irv Muchnick looks at "The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity"

Tuesday, 02 October 2012 15:47

---

Still, without a doubt, a thumbs up. Chad Deity is an expensive and difficult production, destined to fail in a company without requisite resources. But if you have a chance to go on this trippy ride, get a ticket.

Irv Muchnick, author of WRESTLING BABYLON and CHRIS & NANCY, blogs at <http://concussioninc.net>