

THEATER REVIEW | 'MARATHON 2009'

Whether It's Cowboys or Kids' TV, Short Plays Focus on Struggle for Power



From left, Ean Sheehy, David Deblinger and Richmond Hoxie in "Sundance" by M. Z. Ribalow. Zack Brown

Marathon 2009: Series A Off Broadway, Fair/Festival, Play | Closing Date: June 19, 2009 | Ensemble Studio Theatre, 549 W 52nd St. | 212-247-4982

Marathon 2009: Series B Off Broadway, Fair/Festival, Play | Closing Date: June 27, 2009 | Ensemble Studio Theatre, 549 W 52nd St. | 212-247-4982

By Jason Zinoman

June 16, 2009

Jesse — one of the cold-blooded cowboys in the barroom comedy “Sundance,” a work of cultural criticism wrapped neatly in a suspenseful shoot-’em-up western — lives by a strict moral code. He will rape, torture and murder any man, woman or child, but only for pleasure. As for fighting for justice or protecting the righteous, well, a man has got to draw the line somewhere.

In his opening showdown Jesse spars with his rival Hickock (Richmond Hoxie), an old-fashioned gunslinger who says he only kills for cause, and that sadistic killing ruins the reputation of cowboys everywhere.

M. Z. Ribalow’s short play, the last entry of the Series B of “Marathon 2009” at the Ensemble Studio Theater, is a deceptively savvy cultural essay about the mechanics of a beloved American genre wrapped inside a pitch-perfect satire. It applies the same brainy brand of self-consciousness that “Urinetown” used to send up agitprop drama.

When Jesse, played with hilarious conviction and a hair-trigger temper by David Deblinger, asks the barkeep about the origins of the name of the assassin Sundance, he says that there’s “probably some symbolic reason.”

“Or else metaphysical,” he continues. “One or the other, anyway.” Sundance represents a threat to both of these cowboys. Amoral, totally unmotivated and barely verbal, he shoots people simply because, as he puts it chillingly, “they’re there.”

Through the incongruously articulate debates among these cowboys, staged with wit and teasing suspense by Matthew Penn, the darkening evolution of movie morality is mapped, from the fake piety of John Wayne to the nihilism of modern horror.

In its 31 years producing this venerable short-play festival, the Ensemble Studio Theater has staked a claim as the pre-eminent theatrical home for short works by major artistic talents like Sam Shepard, Horton Foote, Neil LaBute, David Mamet, Richard Greenberg and David Auburn.



From left, Julie Leedes, Geneva Carr, Jane Pfitsch, Paul Bartholomew and Steven Boyer in "Little Duck," a behind-the-scenes look at a children's television show.
Zack Brown

The writers this year are lower-profile than usual, but at their best, they understand that the difference between a short play and a long one is not merely length. You suspect that the grad-student cleverness of "Sundance," for instance, would wear thin over 90 minutes. But brevity can be liberating; its limitations allow you to take a risk, because if the play fails, so what it will all be over soon anyway.

While the Marathons are typically mixed bags, with evenly divided line-ups of high and low points, the two evenings of five works provide a pretty clear choice. Series A includes mostly overlong misfires, starting with Kia Corthron's pedestrian political drama, "Trickle," which schematically analyzes the ripple effect of the collapsing economy on ordinary people with the imagination of a connect-the-dots picture book.

"For the Love of God, Saint Teresa," Christine Farrell's Roman Catholic school comedy about a nun disciplining a student, and Maggie Bofill's "Face Cream," about a marital spat featuring a wife panicking about wrinkles, have more potential, but they suffer from a dramatic stasis not uncommon in one-acts.

Not every play works perfectly in Series B either. "Daughter," about parents who watch their daughter leave to fight in Iraq, overheats into tedious melodrama quickly. But as organized by the theater's artistic director, William Carden, Series B nicely builds momentum, with works of gradually increasing ambition.

It starts with Leslie Ayvazian's sweetly comic play "Carol and Jill," in which the playwright stars as the aging Carol ("I'm about to be 60," she mutters, shell-shocked. "Wow. Tough."), whose longtime friendship with another married woman gradually moves in a more romantic direction.

The skillfully understated way Ms. Ayvazian (whose "Make Me" is running currently at the Atlantic 2) develops this relationship, underlining the blurry lines between intimacy and friendship, contrasts with Jeanne Dorsey's more heavy-handed, if often insightful, father-daughter play, "Blood From a Stoner," featuring the veteran actor David Margulies as a pot-smoking and prickly old Brooklyn curmudgeon who can't bring himself to let his daughter know he needs her.

These well-made and carefully observed character portraits about late-life identity crises whet your appetite for the more elaborately stylized worlds of “Sundance” and the confidently drawn farce “Little Duck,” Billy Aronson’s highly amusing look at the boiling sexual intrigue and artistic warfare behind the scenes of a politically correct children’s television program.

Dr. Jill (Julie Leedes), the show’s director of content, grapples with the writer Anne (Geneva Carr) over the virtues of including a “physically challenged” pig as a central character. The artist R J (Steven Boyer) and Robert (Paul Bartholomew), the president of the television station, struggle for power, while the intern Holly (Jane Pfitsch) appears to be aping the career path of Monica Lewinsky. These battles explode in a Bacchanalian conclusion that makes the murderous gunslingers of the Wild West look rather civilized.

Marathon 2009: Series A

Ensemble Studio Theatre

549 W 52nd St.

Midtown West

212-247-4982

Website

Category Off Broadway, Fair/Festival, Play

Opened May 22, 2009

Closed June 19, 2009

This information was last updated on Aug. 27, 2018

Marathon 2009: Series B

Ensemble Studio Theatre

549 W 52nd St.

Midtown West

212-247-4982

Website

Category Off Broadway, Fair/Festival, Play

Opened June 5, 2009

Closed June 27, 2009

This information was last updated on Aug. 27, 2018

“Marathon 2009” continues through June 27 at the Ensemble Studio Theater, 549 West 52nd Street, Clinton; (212) 247-4982.