

Review: Sun Jun 28 2009

Review of *500 Clown and the Elephant Deal*

It doesn't take much to imagine a play date. Everyone has at least one in their memory. Depending on where you lived or who was present, several elements might be guaranteed: dress-up, singing, cops and robbers, changing the rules halfway into the game and little regard for tomorrow.

500 Clown and the Elephant Deal, loosely based on Bertolt Brecht's *Man is Man*, seems also to be based on one of these play dates gone just slightly wrong.

The closest I can get to a storyline is this: Madame Barker is the main act. Her crew, the audience, everyone buys into that mostly because they need her and she needs them. Madame Barker is there to entertain you, the audience.

Like any Queen Bee scenario, Madame Barker has her crew (who sometimes double as backup dancers), who are devoted wholeheartedly to their spectacular leader. They do everything from seating audience members in just the right location to see her, to frantically criss-crossing the stage to locate her chair or mic stand, to climbing scaffolding to maneuver the spotlight on the star: Madame Barker, quite naturally.

The DIY burlesque show's charm is the characters' lack of finesse. Madame Barker is no professional, and the show is certainly low-budget: characters periodically interact with the sound and lighting crews, and they are genuinely excited about each scene's success.

The overall "storyline" is about as linear as any kid-created game. Characters change roles mid-scene (maybe an audience member, or maybe an ex-lover). Bad guys turn into good guys. Good guys take control over the mic and order the rest of the cast (and audience) around.

However, by the end, certain scenarios have become reality. At least one person dies and several, including the Queen Bee, end up alone.

Molly Brennan's performance as the fabulously crass Madame Barker ranges from aggressive in "My Love is Coming to town to Kick Your Ass" to a sweet and tender duet with onstage songwriter John Fournier.

The show, which begins as a one-woman performances, progresses in a way that allows each character to rotate into their spotlight, displaying a glimpse of their needs, fears and goals.

Audiences will understand that the follow-the-leader Cheetah, played by Matt Hawkins, is quite sad; the devoted Viola, played by Jessica Hudson, is actually bursting with sexual appeal; the dopey Bruce, played by Adrian Danzig, is actually quite mad; and the dark Shank, played by Matt Hawkins, will not be told what or who is he is.

The cast's performance is impressive if only for the show's physical demands. Actors scale walls, struggle with a rope and pulley system, run in the aisles and display an outpouring of physical strength.

Watching *Elephant Deal* is not unlike watching kids figure things out for themselves from social cues and trial and error. The difference on this stage, however, is you see much deeper into these characters and, depending on which kid you were growing up, can connect in quite completely in a unique way.

[500 Clown](#)'s mission is to use action-based performance to tell long-form dramatic stories. At the heart of what the non-profit company does is to get the audience to be an active player in a spontaneous moment.

500 Clown and the Elephant Deal is playing at Steppenwolf Upstairs Theater, 1650 N. Halsted St., Wednesday through Saturday until July 11.

— *Margo O'Hara*