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Boom – Review



BOOM

January 15 – 19, 2014

Max Bell Theatre

<https://www.hprodeo.ca/2014/boom>

Depicting 25 years of political, cultural and personal history featuring oodles of famous and infamous newsmakers along with a trio of ordinary folk in a two-hour documentary-style play sounds like a company biting off more than they can chew. Attempting this lofty feat with just one solo actor sounds like insanity.

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However if the production in question is *BOOM* and the writer/director/performer is Rick Miller, not only is the content chewable but the only thing insane about it would be to miss this astonishing whirlwind theatrical experience.

Part performance, part impersonation, part documentary but fully multi-media, *BOOM* (which is premiering at the High Performance Rodeo) tackles the era between 1945 and 1969, or what we in North America more affectionately call the baby boom era. There's lots of dramatic fodder for Miller to mine as he draws on both Canadian and American history and major world events to paint a picture of what it was like to come of age during this pivotal time. It's the time after all when radio gave way to TV and TV helped birth mass consumerism. A time when mellow gentleman crooners like Perry Como were overtaken by sexualized song men like Elvis and Jagger. A time when innovation took us from Hiroshima to landing on the moon. And of course an era when politicians like Kennedy, Castro and Trudeau were making waves at home and abroad. Miller makes sure we see and hear about it all.

Set on a simply configured stage (designed by Yannik Larivee) consisting of a tall vertical cylindrical centre encircled by a horseshoe-like ring that comes to life in a visual splendor of multimedia magic, Miller leads us chronologically through the era playing (impersonating) the world's most influential politicians, activists, actors and musicians. And I mean hundreds of them. Or so it seems. Miller gives voice to everyone from Churchill to Malcom X to Janis Joplin utilizing biting clever lighting, expressive animation and authentic archive footage to seal the effect. Miller sings, plays instruments, orates and unleashes impressions at such a dizzyingly talented pace that he is easily forgiven if one or two of the lot don't quite land as strongly as the others. Conversely, squeals of joy erupt from the audience when Miller gets a particular nostalgic favorite just right as was the case with his 'Rabbit of Seville' bit. The audience also thrills at the litany of era-defining commercials Miller voices such as one showing Camel cigarettes being heartily endorsed by doctors as their preferred brand.

While there is no question that we are mesmerized by David's Leclerc's projections, Bruno Matte's lighting and Miller's seemingly endless ability to impersonate any individual, it's the personal that elevates this show from being simply a visual and aural trip down memory lane. At the outset of the play, Miller gives voice to three baby boomers, Madeline, a small town Ontario woman who also happens to be his mother; Lawrence, a black American draft dodger/musician and Rudolph, an Austrian living in the American zone of Berlin. It's through these characters and their feelings/ reactions to the events around them that really gives *BOOM* its heft. Granted, in the cacophony of information and images that abound in this show, it takes some time to latch on to these individual stories, but once hooked we are on the edge of our seats to see what happens to them next.

Clocking in at two hours without intermission, *BOOM* is an exhaustingly busy but thrilling production that makes twenty-five years of history fly by in a manner that both tickles us intellectually and thoroughly entertains us. It was 1964 when Bob Dylan sang *The Times They Are a-Changin'* and while his song of transformation wasn't about how we experience theatre, it most certainly could pertain to Miller's show. *BOOM* is not simply a superlative theatrical experience, but I'd venture to say that it will change the way we think of historical-docu period plays from now on.

RATING

For Boomers – I sat in front of a bullseye boomer woman who quietly laughed and sang and cried and nodded her head in agreement throughout the entire

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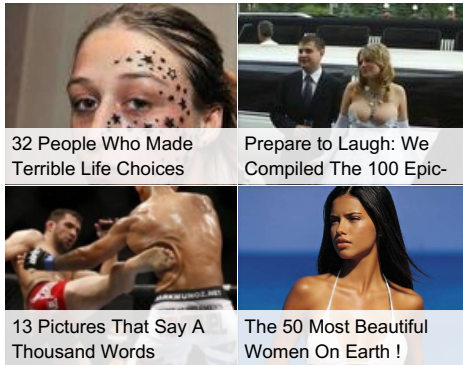
show. This is your story told brilliantly. **SEE IT**

For political/cultural history buffs – I'm not of the boomer generation, yet there was not one song or political event/figure or issue of the era I wasn't acutely familiar with. It's amazing how you can have nostalgia for things you didn't yourself experience. Add to that the thrilling production and engaging personal narrative and you have a winner. **SEE IT**

For the unaware – Several times I wondered how the 20-somethings who have no or little knowledge of the political/cultural references in the show were experiencing the performance. No doubt much was lost on them. But the heart of *BOOM* is the personal coming of age journey experienced by three relatable characters that I believe transcends the fact that one may not know who Sly and the Family Stone is. Besides, you will never get a more enjoyable or visually arresting history lesson than this. **MAYBE SEE IT**

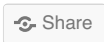
For theatre junkies. I could go on about how this show pushes the boundaries of docu-theatre and multimedia accompaniment. I could talk about how beautifully narrative is cushioned in context. I could speak of Miller's outstanding command of his material. But really I just want to say GO. NOW! **SEE IT**

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