

"PLAY DEAD" (Stage Review)

Written by Shade Rupe

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Manhattan's famed Players Theater becomes the PLAY DEAD Theater from now through its opening on November 10, and beyond, as magicians Teller (of Penn and Teller fame) and Todd Robbins transform the crimson walls into a theater of blood and fear with their highly inventive and hair-raising show, PLAY DEAD, a journey, quite literally, into darkness.

And that is just one of the many high high high points of this magnificent four-dimensional magic trick of phantasmagoric delights as Sirs Teller and Robbins have taken theater out of the front of your eyes and into your mind as chunks of the show are performed in the pitch blackness of your own mind's imaginings when Todd turns to the audience with a sly grin and not only turns off the house lights, but those long-annoying exit sings that plague theatergoers the world over. And when that switch is clicked, and the audience is surrounded no longer by seats and other patrons, but only deep inky blackness, then the real theater begins, the theater of your own mind, accentuated of course by the diabolical duo of Teller and Todd, your frightmasters into the truly unknown!

A rollercoaster amalgam of brilliant theatrical styles, PLAY DEAD is the Grand Guignol you've been hoping for—in-your-face live blood and magic, a constant sense of wonder as lights go out for long periods and in that darkness fingers will brush past your neck, even several seats from the aisle. As Monsieur Robbins stories' move on more human elements come into the mix like a miraculously appearing nude zombie woman, though thankfully the creative team has only marred her face, and left her beautiful body to ballet onstage and twirl and...uh...well, you'll just have to see!

Teller opens the show with his own recorded monologue, telling everyone to turn off their phones completely so the light doesn't interrupt the show. And once that's done, he adds, "Now you have no way to call for help." And your ghostly host Todd Robbins takes it from there. Long a master of creepy ghoully outlandish freakiness with his sideshow performances, Robbins takes the ringmaster's stance as he passes around a lightbulb, ascertains its validity as a

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lightbulb from audience members, then smashes it and eats it up! And we're only about two minutes in here...

Though all the bloodletting, nude women, bodies dissolved in acid, and audience members disappearing is all magnificent live-theater fun, the more intense parts of the show are actually the less colorful: those that take place in the dark. When Todd first blanks out the exit signs and notes to the audience that now your imagination is creating the show, can't you just feel the inky blackness before you?...and then audience members scream out, wanting to jump out of their seats as apparitions form and necklines are touched by creatures lurking in the black. The experience is truly remarkable, and unlike any other theatrical experience I've known, working completely on an experiential level of excitement for the mind that it usually does not have the chance to experience. Even if we're alone in a cabin in the woods, there's a fire going, a flashlight in hand, a match struck and burning. In the confines of the Players Theaters, though, no such luck.

It would be unfair to continue describing the events of the show itself. My brain remained electrified with the constant onslaught of tricks, treats, wonder, incredulity, disgust, and fascination. Teller's deft hand and Robbins fearless sideshow barker form a whirlwind of intense delight. For all the long lines for overpriced haunted houses in Manhattan, many of which provoke nary a scare during their twenty-minute walkthroughs, PLAY DEAD is an 80-minute tour through a haunted mansion with mile-a-minute scares and laughs and freakouts, all in the 'safety' of your reserved seat. PLAY DEAD is like being inside a living magic trick. Though this time when the lights go out, you're the one who disappears...

{comments on}