

In With the Old – Bill Irwin and David Shiner's *Old Hats* at the Signature Theatre

Since its inaugural season in 2011, the Pershing Square Signature Theatre, designed by legendary architect Frank Gehry, has housed some of the new classics of the American canon, producing plays by everyone from Edward Albee to the more contemporary Will Eno. The space is large, almost industrial, but its open floor plan and easy visual access to the bookstore, bar, and couches serves to create an extremely welcoming environment for an audience member. The lobby display outside of the auditorium is a large corkboard, with posters, pictures, and quotes that are all held to the board with visible colored push-pins, creating the environment of something constructed, something not trying to hide the pieces that create the whole.

It is the perfect setting for Bill Irwin and David Shiner's *Old Hats*, which is, at its core, a vaudeville style clowning piece. The humor of the piece is base and physical, even goofy at times, and holds no pretention in terms of reaching and connecting with an audience. The raw and honest elements of the space and the performance complement each other perfectly, establishing for the audience an environment in which they can feel comfortable, welcome, at ease. This comfort then opens the door for what is to come, and puts the audience exactly where the clowns want them to be physically and emotionally.

Aiding in establishing the emotional environment of the piece is the last element of the evening's performance. Singer Nellie McKay completes the trio, adding her delightfully whimsical (albeit slightly heavy-handed) music and comedy to the show. Her songs act as an intermezzo to the clowning pieces, coming in during set and costume changes. McKay, upon first listen, has the same "quirky girl with a ukulele" sound of today's yogurt and paper towel commercials. The music is funny and critical, with such pieces as "Mother of Pearl," in which McKay proclaims that "feminists don't have a sense of humor...they have a tumor on their funny bone." Additionally, McKay performs some short snippets of improv with the clowns, which lightens the mood a bit when things get too heavy.

In *Signature Stories*, the theatre's publication, David Shiner is quoted as saying, "I love going into people's private space without being invited," and that is just what he and Irwin do in this show. Underneath the (brilliantly done) physical humor and clowning, this dynamic pair takes on some pretty huge issues. The vignette entitled "The Debate," in which Shiner and Irwin face off as rival politicians, explores the "dog and pony show" side of campaign issues, putting the audience in the position of flip-flopping between them, approving of the individual who looks better in any given moment.

Two of the individual pieces within the show were, perhaps, the strongest moments of it. "The Hobo," in which David Shiner plays a homeless man on a park bench who desperately needs help, but refuses to actively seek it out, exposes the world of those cast aside by mainstream society. The theatre was almost silent during this portion of the performance, and I found my internal monologue arguing with itself over whether I

would help this man had I come across him in the street. In the same vein, Bill Irwin's solo piece, "Mr. Business," acted as an exposé of the technology-driven, self-obsessed world we live in. In using creative and seamless technological lazzi, Irwin seems to disappear and become one with his iPad, reacting to and interacting with the smaller, digital version of himself that danced across the screen of the tablet.

In these moments, and the rest of the short scenes that the clowns performed, Irwin and Shiner truly enter the private space of their audience without being invited. Something as innocuous as a pair of clowns becomes an accusatory mirror turned on the audience, the comedy functioning to sugar-coat the blow of exposing all that is wrong with the way we live.

The realm of theatre has taken a drastic aesthetic shift in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Audiences have grown complacent (or is it bored?) with the neatly wrapped packages of the Millers' and Williams'. Aristotle's catharsis is on an extended vacation, and his sister anagnorisis is house-sitting. Audiences are no longer looking for resolution, but are in search of self-discovery. Bill Irwin and David Shiner take this one step further, and instead of the characters on stage making the critical discovery, they (in an almost Brechtian fashion) hold a mirror to society and force their audience to experience a sense of self-realization and personal exploration. Irwin and Shiner take no issue in calling us out on everything from our self-absorption and classism to our inability to connect with our fellow human being. And the whole time they do it, we are laughing.