

Old Hats from Bill Irwin and David Shiner: An evening with the clowns

Robert Fowler
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Written and performed by Bill Irwin and David Shiner, music by and featuring Nellie McKay, directed by Tina Landau, at the Signature Theatre, New York City, through June 9.

Old Hats, now playing in New York, is a highly entertaining night out at the theater for people of all ages. Veteran performers Bill Irwin and David Shiner splendidly (and literally) bounce off each other for the one hour and 50 minute show.

Irwin and Shiner's previous collaboration *Fool Moon* played on Broadway in 1993 and toured extensively throughout America and Europe to great critical acclaim. The duo are also seasoned actors. Irwin in particular has performed in numerous films and television series (*CSI*, *Rachel Getting Married*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Igby Goes Down* and many others).

Wonderfully on display in *Old Hats*, however, are the duo's classic vaudevillian skills. The show is a compelling example of how powerful performing without dialogue can be. The comic duo's work inevitably brings to mind the greats of silent cinema—Keaton, Chaplin, Harold Lloyd—and, of course, other double acts such as Laurel and Hardy.

The clowns' performance also contains elements of insightful social criticism—most notably in an early sketch entitled “The Debate,” which depicts the total inanity of contemporary American politics.

In this piece, Irwin and Shiner—each in his own well-established persona—mime taking digs at one another from their respective podiums in an effort to win the hearts and minds—and votes—of the public. Their carrying on includes a standard photo shoot with a baby to bring home the candidate's “sensitivity.” A plethora of physical attacks on one another includes Irwin being assaulted by a boxing glove that springs up from

underneath Shiner's podium. This moment felt genuinely surprising and spontaneous.

Throughout “The Debate” giant red arrows are placed behind the performers' backs. The arrows go up and down based on the level of success of the given politician's pandering. The candidates' nasty and personal back-and-forth climaxes when they rip off one another's shirts to reveal that each is wearing a bra!

A solo piece of Irwin's, “Mr. Business,” is one of the show's highlights. Here Irwin parodies the single-minded businessman seemingly unable to prise himself away from his iPhone and iPad, as he stomps aimlessly down a city street. The character's self-absorption and unawareness eventually lead him to be swallowed up by the technology he has grown so attached to. Irwin's physicality is incredible in this sketch and belies his sixty-three years.

Shiner fares quite as well in a solo of his own entitled “The Hobo.” Here he portrays a lonely homeless figure on a park bench in what could be any city in the world. He rummages through a garbage can as though desperately seeking company. One by one, he removes items that systematically reject him. Amongst the objects are a rose and a stuffed teddy bear. The flower wilts and the toy bear's head falls off.

The Hobo finds a cell phone. He dials 911 and an impatient voice on the other end of the line demands: “What is your emergency?” The Hobo would like to ask for help, but he is reluctant at the same time. His situation *is*, in fact, an emergency, but not one that official society recognizes as such. One senses he knows he won't be taken seriously. This moment was poignantly represented by Shiner, and there was an eerie silence in the theater for much of the sketch, perhaps indicating its power and relevance to the conditions faced by great numbers of people

worldwide. It should be noted, however, that the music accompanying this scene was a little heavy-handed.

In this new production Irwin and Shiner have added the musical skills of singer-songwriter and former comedienne Nellie McKay. She conducts a group of musicians while performing her self-penned songs. However, many of McKay's musical contributions were weak, in this reviewer's opinion.

For example, an early number, "Won't U please B Nice," was in terribly poor taste. It includes these lyrics: "If you would sit /Oh so close to me /That would be nice /Like it's supposed to be /If you don't I'll slit your throat." The moment showed a remarkable disregard for the children in the audience. Director Tina Landau should obviously shoulder some blame for this also.

In fact, McKay's performance came across much of the time as smug and rather self-satisfied, including her rendition of "Mother Pearl," which satirizes right-wing opponents of feminism. "Feminists don't have a sense of humor," she sang in a brutish male New York accent, "They say child molestation isn't funny /Rape and degradation's just a crime (lighten up, ladies) /Rampant prostitution, sex for money (what's wrong with that) /Can't these chicks do anything but whine." Crude stuff.

In "Magic Act," Irwin steals the scene as a female assistant to Shiner's sleazy magician. Irwin's hilarious facial mimicking of the jealous helper brought the late Margaret Thatcher to mind. Meanwhile Shiner's character tries to impress the audience with a variety of contrived and clichéd tricks. He sets his sights specifically on female audience members—pursuing one in particular for the famous "sawing in half" trick. Thankfully, the audience member in question seemed quite pleased to be sliced in half by the idiot illusionist.

It is to the credit of both Shiner and Irwin that all the audience participation sequences were executed in good fun.

This was especially evident in the show's marvelous denouement, "Cowboy Cinema." Shiner plays an embittered film director who tries to guide audience members through what must be said were quite complex routines. The dictatorial director grows increasingly frustrated with his actors' abilities.

At one point in this bit, one unsuspecting audience member selected to assist Shiner mistakenly spoke,

which led Irwin to come on stage and remonstrate with him insisting that he could do no such thing. It was an inspired moment of improvisation.

One of the few forgettable skits of the evening was a piece entitled "An Encounter." In this scene, one elderly gentleman accidentally slips a Viagra pill to another and of course what then occurs is quite predictable.

However, this sketch was an exception in what was generally a very pleasurable evening of clowning. *Old Hats* is a show that appeals to spectators of all ages and is a welcome respite from so much of the stale, lifeless productions that can be seen on the New York stage on a nightly basis.

To be able to keep a child entertained for almost two hours is a rare gift and this reviewer was sitting not too far from a young boy whose eyes lit up at almost every sketch performed by Irwin and Shiner. It may even have been this child's first time in the theater. If so, I am sure this production will long live in his memory.



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