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Billy & Ray

by Winnie McCroy

EDGE Editor

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Vincent Kartheiser, Sophie von Haselberg and Larry Pine (Source:Carol Rosegg)

Those who love classic films often describe themselves as having a 'passion' for the old movies. And this descriptor is apt. Delving into the past is a dangerous obsession, as we must resist the urge to either glamorize or sanitize it. Luckily, no-nonsense director Garry Marshall is at the helm of Mike Bencivenga's "Billy & Ray," now playing at The Vineyard Theatre.

This tight production takes the audience to the Golden Age of Hollywood, where writer/director Billy Wilder is attempting to adapt the shoddy little pulp novel "Double Indemnity" into a screenplay, with the help of contrary old curmudgeon, novelist Raymond Chandler.

"Mad Men" star Vincent Kartheiser plays Wilder with zeal, charm and a not-so-wunderbar Austrian accent. But except for the occasional stumble over his lines, Kartheiser is excellent. He's nothing like you might imagine Wilder to be, and that's probably for the best.

In the role of Chandler is Broadway veteran Larry Pine, who is pitch-perfect as a contentious, hard-boiled novelist who hates noise (thanks to his time in the war) and wants to love his wife as much as he loves bourbon, but occasionally misses that mark.

Together, the two begrudgingly work to turn the novel into what will become the legendary movie that defined what 'film noir' would be. Complicating things are the strict Hollywood Code that prevents them from showing sex, adultery, murder or a dead body. In a movie about an adulterous couple who plot and execute the murder of the woman's husband to cash in a hefty insurance policy, these prove stumbling blocks.

Also littering the pathway to success is Chandler's refusal to put up with Wilder's commanding personality, as well as his secret tipting. Wilder doesn't fare much better with his incessant boozing and womanizing. Although the two are constantly at each others' throats, Chandler needs the money, and Wilder needs Chandler. So they find a way to navigate through the thorns and discover a bed of murderous roses at the end.

Sophie von Haselberg shines as Wilder's long-suffering secretary Helen, and here, too, we must be cautious as to whether we love her or just love the idea of her. For she is the Divine Miss M's daughter, and is the spitting image of Bette Midler, from her voice to her figure to her face -- only her lips are a bit thinner.

That said, it is difficult to imagine that von Haselberg would fail to succeed as did her mother. She has all the talent and moxie of Midler, all tied up in a beloved little bundle that America already knows. As in the case of the talented Colin Hanks and Josh Ritter, sometimes children of stars become stars due to a combination of their acting chops and their celebrity visage. That doesn't cheapen their success one bit.

Rounding out the cast is Drew Gehling as the beleaguered studio chief who is about to throw in the towel on the whole project -- right up until he reads the first several pages of the screenplay.

In the end, the two find clever, groundbreaking cinematographic ways to show an affair and a murder without 'showing' either. They end up casting Barbra Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray and Edward G. Robinson as their stars, and after changing a clunky ending, realize success beyond their wildest dreams. They also realize that, in the end, "Double Indemnity" is a love story between two men. And in many ways, that is the



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core message of "Billy & Ray" as well.

"Billy & Ray" runs through Nov. 9 at The Vineyard Theatre, 108 E 15th Street in New York City. For information or tickets, call 212-353-0303 or visit <http://www.vineyardtheatre.org/tickets/now-on-sale/>

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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