

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Rich and Famous

BY JOHN GUARE

DIRECTED BY JOHN RANDO

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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BLAZE OF GLORY

BY LESLEY GIBSON

In *Rich and Famous*, Bing Ringling's wealthy and successful producer, Veronica Gulpp-Vestige, gains a perverse sort of ecstasy from finally being associated with a flop. "My hits linger year after year," she says, before climbing into a garbage can. "Failures are these beautiful youths who died before their time."

To some fans of the theater, there is a particular delight in witnessing a major dramatic disaster. A live-action catastrophe, if it is truly bad enough, can evoke as sublime an emotional experience as a perfectly executed masterpiece, and may provide audience members with bragging rights for a lifetime. After all, the biggest Broadway hits run for months if not years at a time, play to sold-out audiences, and launch massive world tours that are seen by thousands. But for those flops that are so abysmal they achieve the elusive humiliation of closing on opening night, only a very select few individuals will have disastrous anecdotes with which to regale their friends.

DEAD MOOSE

Two productions in Broadway's recent past were such colossal failures that they live on as legends of majestic catastrophe in theater lore, failures that fans continue to regard with wicked fondness: the 1983 play *Moose Murders* and the 1988 musical adaptation of the Stephen King novel *Carrie*.

It is generally accepted among theater aficionados that Arthur Bicknell's *Moose Murders* remains the epitome of bad on Broadway. The bizarre mystery farce chronicles the events of a single night as an absurd cast of characters find themselves stuck in a hunting lodge in the Adirondacks during a thunderstorm in the wake of a murder: the maniacal millionaire Hedda Holloway; her quadriplegic husband, Sidney; their son, Stinky, whose singular goal is to sleep with his mother; their anorexic elder daughter, Lauraine; and their young tap-dancing daughter, Gay. Audiences watched aghast as the ludicrous events of the play unfolded, including the wheelchair-bound Sidney's unexplained rise to his feet to kick an intruder dressed in a moose costume in the groin. In the play's final scene, Hedda clapped in delight as Gay, whom she had served a poisoned martini, expired on the floor in agony.

The terrible script was further tainted by a ruinous preview process (including one performance to which a particularly rotund gentleman arrived late, reeking of the fresh vomit that ran down his shirt front). The bad buzz building up to the show's opening was

an ominous portent of the production's fate. *Moose Murders* opened on February 22 and closed the following day.

The reviews for *Moose Murders* were not simply poor evaluations of a disappointing production. They expressed a range of emotions from critics, who received the play with befuddlement, humor, and depression. *New York* magazine's John Simon declared the play "abysmally imbecile," adding, "[It was] as close as I ever hope to get to the bottomless pit." The *New Yorker's* Brendan Gill described it as a play that "would insult the intelligence of an audience consisting entirely of amoebas," while Dennis Cunningham, critic at the CBS affiliate in New York, declared: "If your name is Arthur Bicknell—or anything like it—change it."

The *New York Times's* Frank Rich opened his review with the statement, "From now on, there will always be two groups of theatergoers in this world: those who have seen *Moose Murders*, and those who have not." Eleven years later, when he stepped down from his post as the *Times's* chief theater critic, Rich still remembered the show as "the worst play I've ever seen on a Broadway stage." Yet members of the original cast boast their *Moose Murder* credit in *Playbill* biographies, the number of people who claim to have seen the original



The shower scene from the legendary 1988 Broadway production of *Carrie*: young ladies taunt ignorant Carrie on the occasion of her first period. Photo courtesy Peter Cunningham.

production has climbed to physically impossible proportions, and tribute productions of *Moose Murders* continue to appear in venues from Oklahoma to the Philippines.

MISERABLE MUSICALS

There is nothing quite so exquisitely entertaining as a bad musical, but major Broadway musical flops are a relatively rare treat in this day and age. Cultural and economic factors have shrunk the number of new musical works launched each Broadway season to a fraction of what they once were. In the current climate, it is not uncommon for a musical to run at one theater for years, while those same theaters once hosted two or three shows in a single season. During the 1960s and '70s, new works reached the Broadway stage at a much more frequent rate; there were therefore many more opportunities for instant flops. Even now, however, every few years or so a show makes it to Broadway that is so bad that the producers are left with no other option but to close it immediately after opening. Recent stinkers have included Andrew Lloyd Weber's *The Woman in White* (2004)—proving that even traditional hit makers can stumble—Elton John's *Lestat* (2005), *High Fidelity* (2006), and the \$12 million *Mambo Kings* (2005), which bombed so badly in its San Francisco try-out that it never even made it to Broadway.

None of these, however, surpasses the cult fame of *Carrie*, which crashed and burned—or, in Rich's words, “expire[d] with fireworks like the Hindenburg”—on the Broadway stage in 1988. Plagued by “faceless, bubble gum music [and] grotesque sub-Atlantic City costumes,” an over-the-hill cast badly mimicking teenagers, and faux pig's blood of a syrupy texture and appearance, *Carrie* has become the Broadway flop against which all flops are measured. In *Not Since Carrie*, his 1991 collection of musical flop stories, Ken Mandelbaum describes the mood after the show's first preview:

As the audience files out, some appear thrilled, others appalled; the word most frequently bandied about is “unbelievable.” For show freaks, this has been a night unlike any other, the kind for which they have waited a lifetime. . . . These fans are aware that what they have just witnessed has set a new standard, one to which all future musical flops will be compared and found wanting.

Carrie did not close on opening night, but lasted five full performances. Rich's review noted, “Only the absence of antlers separates the pig murders of *Carrie* from the *Moose Murders* of Broadway lore.” The show became an instant failure and an enduring legend.

THE KEY TO FAILURE

Under what circumstances does a show close so quickly?

Most theatrical failures follow a similar pattern. By the time a show makes it to the Broadway stage, it has undergone a series of preview performances and, often, an out-of-town warm-up run. Typically presented at a high-profile regional theater, a warm-up run gives the producers and the director a chance to gauge the critical and popular reception and make any necessary adjustments before thrusting the show into the Broadway spotlight. The official opening in New York will be preceded by 15–20 previews—complete performances of the show, in costume, before live audiences, that give the director a last chance to tweak the show before it is considered officially ready and subjected to the critical review of the press.

Some shows begin to garner negative word of mouth from individuals who see the show while it's still in previews. The advent of the internet has accelerated the spread of bad buzz, as computer-age producers live in fear of scathing critique from the “chatterati” who frequent online theater forums like *talkinbroadway.com*'s All That Chat. Sometimes the buzz results in poor ticket sales; if the producers recognize they have a subpar product and anticipate harsh opening night reviews, they may secretly begin to consider closing the show immediately after it opens. The assumption is that, with low ticket sales, each additional performance costs more to produce than they earn, so shutting down the production is a safer bet financially than continuing operations.

Not all failures crash and burn in a blaze of glory. The more banal flops are quickly forgotten, their memory only kept alive as tales for theater geeks and warnings to producers of the future. This type of flop does not necessarily occur because of large-scale artistic or financial catastrophe, but because the show itself is ill conceived, underdeveloped, or simply boring. A 2003 adaptation of Allan Gurganus's novel *The Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, for example, a one-woman show that closed on opening night, failed to create a riveting theatrical experience out of the experiences of a frail, bed-ridden elderly woman on death's doorstep. And the 2008 *Glory Days*, a musical by two 23-year-olds about a group of mild-mannered middle-class high school friends who reunite after a year away at college, was critically dismissed as a nice try by earnest young men; the show sold at a mere 20 percent of capacity and quietly closed the morning after it opened.

On his way to the opening night performance of his 844th play, a work apparently destined to find its place in the annals of legendary New York theater flops, Bing puts on a pair of cuff links, a gift from his girlfriend. The cuff links bear the initials R and F for “rich” and “famous.” “I don't care which one comes first,” he tells Leanara. We will never know if Bing achieves the wealth he dreams of, but we can only hope that the failure of *The Etruscan Conundrum* will grant him the notoriety he yearns for.