



NYTheatre in Review, October 2011

by

Martin Denton, www.nytheatre.com

I just spent two nights in a row at Stage Left Studio, the cozy, welcoming space operated by Cheryl King that's located on the sixth floor of a building not far from Penn Station. Two FANTASTIC nights, I should add: the work currently on view here is among the very best that the NYC theater has to offer. I can't recommend them more highly.

Bait 'n' Swish, which runs Thursdays and Fridays through November 18, is the funniest evening of theater I've seen in quite a long time. It's written by David Sisco, who also co-stars as Charlie, a 30-year-old gay man who, in the first act, is searching for love and companionship, albeit rather warily. His pal Justin, played by Tom Gualtieri, has brought him to a gay speed dating evening at a Howard Johnson's in Hell's Kitchen. What follows is one of the most hilarious hours I've had the pleasure to witness, as Sisco and Gualtieri portray Charlie and Justin AND all of the (mostly freaky) men they encounter in this weird and wacky outing. Director Laura Josepher keeps the pace moving at lightning speed, and she and Sisco continually vary the format so that there's no time to get bored.

Mostly we marvel at the cavalcade of characters: the *Star Trek* geek, the therapist who's never off duty, the ultra-masculine "top man" looking for a threesome, the sweet Southern 21-year-old who's still a virgin. Many are over-the-top, while some, like Michael the lawyer (who spends his free time tagging endangered birds) are just too good to be true. As Charlie and Justin zip through the panoply of possibilities, they come to learn some important things about themselves and about their own relationship.

Act Two picks up three years later. Charlie has journeyed out to Boise, Idaho, ostensibly to try to write his second book while helping his aunt clear things out following the death of her husband. But Justin knows (and we know) that Charlie has an ulterior motive: he's on the run from problems here at home in NYC.

An immediate visit from his aunt's neighbor Delores Kinney pushes Charlie way outside his comfort zone. Delores, who is kind of like what Auntie Mame would have been like if she'd been a housewife in the American Heartland, drags Charlie unwillingly to the local gay bar, where he meets Ryan, a flaky ballet dancer; Adam, Ryan's former boyfriend, an attorney; and Bill, stone-faced and silent with surprising glimmers of passion. These three want to open a gay club in Boise, but the conservative City Council managed to rezone their proposed location before they could move forward. Delores convinces—no, orders—Charlie to help them write their appeal, and before you can say "White Party" Charlie is deeply immersed in helping the boys get their business off the ground.

As in the first part, the outlandish and unexpected goings-on frame the acquisition of important insight and self-knowledge for Charlie; he really does grow as a result of his experience out west. And so do we; and we also laugh and laugh, for this half of *Bait 'n' Swish* is every bit as funny the first.

The whole evening is a testament to the strength of Sisco's writing and the brilliant performances of Gualtieri and Sisco. Gualtieri, particularly, shines in the second act, in which he plays every character that's not Charlie—probably around two dozen or so, including a succession of outré drag queens; the delightful trio of Adam, Ryan, and Bill; and, especially, the formidable and fabulous Delores. That he does this without changing his costume or even adding a single prop or accessory makes the feat even more wondrous. We always know which character he's inhabiting at any given moment. Sisco has written enough meaty parts to satisfy an entire company of expert actors, and he's lucky that, in Gualtieri, he's got the one-man equivalent.

I LOVED *Bait 'n' Swish*. It's warm, witty, smart, and a ton of fun. It's ready to be moved to Broadway or some other place where Sisco, Gualtieri, and Josepher can share their work with a much larger audience and be well compensated for it. Producers, are you reading?

Gayer Tuna, October 2011

by

Gary Larcan, www.stageandcinema.com

In "Bait" – the first of the two interconnected one-acts in *Bait n' Swish* – we meet Charlie and Justin, best friends looking for Mr. Right at Gay Bait, a gay speed-dating event in a Manhattan Howard Johnson's. In their 3-minute rotating gay dates, they meet a horde of men looking for an assortment of connections: threesomes, an acting job, their first boyfriend, action in the men's room (with a transvestite), a male version of their mother, younger men, older men, butcher men, fisting partners, less-jaded men, daddies, and to bond with a fellow Star Trek fanatic (with a lisp that could give the first row a shower).

These men look for what they think they want, with varying degrees of disappointment, until the jaded Charlie actually finds a diamond in the rough. Is he ready to actually take a chance on a sane man who knows who he is and what he has to offer? Before he finds out, things are complicated by the age-old choice between friendship and relationship.

Gay Bait is hosted by Chad and Brad, a flamboyant and "perfect" couple. As the event unfolds, we watch the façade of their relationship crack, crumble, and get respackled – as they battle each other for control over the all-powerful whistle that cues the group to rotate to their next date.

It needs to be said... Charlie, Justin, the Gay Bait hosts, and the other 28 men looking for a date are all miraculously played by two versatile actors: Tom Gualtieri and David Sisco. Without costume changes, but with instant, carefully chosen shifts in voice, posture, manner, and level of nelliness, they transform into all of "Bait's 32 characters.

Some of the clichéd characters are so true that they're...well, sad; and sometimes they're so true that they're hysterical. This one-act (first performed in 2006) is not, by any means, an endorsement for speed dating, but confirms how difficult it can be to find Mr. Right – especially if you think you know what you're looking for. It's also very funny in how it shows how much or little you can learn about someone in 3 minutes.

After an intermission, the companion piece, "Swish" (both acts are written by Mr. Sisco) picks up the Charlie/Justin relationship at a different stage. Mr. Sisco's Charlie moves to Boise, Idaho to write his next book and to take care of some family business.

Mr. Gualtieri continues to play Justin (who stays in New York) as well as everyone else Charlie meets in Boise: Bill (the gay-of-few-words grain farmer), Ryan (the younger Dancer with boundless nerve and flexibility), Adam (the overly confident banker), and the bevy of

beauties auditioning for the Bingo drag queen host. There is one more character in "Swish" – Deloris, the only true female character in the evening. Deloris is Charlie's folksy Auntie Mame: all accepting, all knowing, and – as played by the delightful Mr. Gualtieri – darn funny. Like *Greater Tuna*, we learn a lot about the town through its inhabitants.

As Charlie waffles about his relationship and an idea for his new book, Deloris introduces him to Boise's gay scene. Charlie quickly discovers "We're not in 'Manhattan' anymore." "A horseshoe pit at a gay bar?!" He finds that his expertise is needed to improve the gay scene. At this point, Mickey and Judy would put on a show; instead, Charlie and his Boise boys open a gay club. In Boise. The second gay club in Boise.

"Swish," written after "Bait," is the more mature piece, as we're taken farther along in Charlie's journey and the other characters are more developed. Mr. Sisco, a generous writer, gives Mr. Gualtieri a great opportunity to develop a menagerie

of characters with much more depth (and just as much humor), which he does very affectively. Together the two pieces blend camp with an edge and a more realistic romance.

Written and played with heart, only the tour-de-force moment when Mr. Gualtieri plays a rapid-fire series of auditionees for the new club's Drag Bingo host do they go straight for laughs (which are mined successfully).

Director Laura Josepher does an excellent job of shaping and sharpening the actors' total of 49 characters. Pace and tone are key with this kind of material, which Ms. Josepher handles with aplomb. With this stripped-down production, she puts the story of Charlie and Justin front and center, foregoing technical and design elements. The actors perform their own "set changes" and often their own sound cues. Clearly this artistic collaboration of director, writer/actor, and actor is an effective creative team. The program lists no designers or even a stage manager. Watching it was like watching a comedy team comfortable dealing with each other, the audience, and the material; they even expertly navigated a flub or two with ad-libs.

The production is small in scale: actors – 2; costumes – 2; chairs – 4; stools – 2; characters – 49 (which is technically more than the capacity of the intimate jewel box Stage Left Studio can hold); props – few; laughs – plenty. What it's lacking is flattering press photos: these men are much cuter than the pictures let on. Not that that's important; just saying.

Review: Bait n' Swish, October 2011

by

Laurie Lawson, www.eljnyc.com

For those of you straight folks who have uttered in total frustration "I'm considering being gay" after yet another failed relationship, not so fast! Tom Gualtieri and David Sisco are here to tell you that gay relationships are no day at the beach. In Sisco's hilarious BAIT N' SWISH you experience the frenzied agony of Gay Bait speed dating in New York City, as well as the small town everybody-knows-your-name underworld of gay Boise, Idaho. The laughs throughout are plentiful due to some

sophisticated humor and the undeniable talents of Gualtieri and Sisco. These guys roll through 49 characters, one funnier than the other. Accents, genders, ages, body language, and speech impediments – no problem. They only serve as a showcase for the actors' versatility. If you want to laugh for two hours straight (no pun intended), BAIT N' SWISH is the place you need to be.

Review: Bait n' Swish, October 2011

by

Kuale, SubUrban Underground TV
www.therealdjstereotype.com

It is always interesting to be given the opportunity to go behind a closed door to get more insight into worlds, lifestyles, ideas, and communities that one does not get to frequent often or necessarily identify with...

The thing about going on these journeys is that one has the responsibility of keeping an open mind, which is where artists, producers, and consumers alike tend to get stuck.

We all know what we know and tend to have convictions to those things.

It is a rare situation when a person can tap into something realistic in all of its humanity, humor, pain, and emotions while placating to an audience with expectations and not fall into a stereotyped category.

The two man show(s) Bait n' Swish are interesting because they flirt with aspects of the gay life that are very typical... but do it in such an authentic and entertaining way that you don't really care.

What I liked about the shows was that they had a great sense of humor while maintaining a sense of self that felt honest.

Tom Gualtieri and David Sisco play almost 50 distinct characters amongst themselves... AND DO THEM ALL JUSTICE.

Absolutely uncanny.

Circumstantially there were times when I felt like I was watching "Will n' Grace" re-runs... But I was entertained and walked away feeling a larger sense of connection and understanding to the white boy, Chelsea/Hells Kitchen-esque, New York City Way.

Not to mention that it was funny as hell.

I liked it and would totally recommend it to friends.

Review: Bait
NYTheatre.com, April 5, 2008
by
Robert Weinstein, www.nytheatre.com

"Gay Bait," the speed-dating event at the center of David Sisco's hilarious play **BAIT**, takes place at a Hell's Kitchen Howard Johnson's in a time the play's program describes as "Tonight." The rules of the game, as explained by the deeply troubled couple that organized it, are relatively simple: each participant is given a red or blue coin and a scorecard. Those with red coins stay where they are; those with blue coins rotate. Each pair has three minutes to interact, scope each other out, interview one another or, as proves to be the case as the evening plays itself out, make fools of themselves. At the end of those three minutes, a whistle blows. The rovers then proceed to the next person, where they are given another three minutes. After each encounter, people rate each other on their scorecards. At the end of the evening, the scorecards are gathered and evaluated. Those with matching high scores are given each other's contact information.

Into this fray walk Justin and Charlie, two friends with divergent agendas. Justin is the more adventurous of the two and he wants to spend the evening meeting people and, if the moment is right, engage in a hook-up. He's also out to show Charlie, a sensitive and cynical sort who hasn't dated in a while, a good time. Charlie doesn't seem to have much faith in the event though, and his presence there is pretty much against his will. But before we are allowed to ask why this is, the whistle blows and our heroes are off. Adult swim has begun.

The pickings are slim at the Howard Johnson's and the parade of weirdos Justin and Charlie encounter is endless. The evening is full of helpless men, one after the other, exposing themselves, their quirks, and their follies through the filters of Justin and Charlie. And in different hands, the proceedings, coming in a quick 60 minutes, might easily have come across as mean and incredibly cynical if not for a couple of tricks up its theatrical sleeve.

The first of these has to do with the fact all of these characters are portrayed by two actors. Tom Gualtieri and David Sisco play roughly 14 characters apiece and do so with smarts, energy, and originality. They jump from character to character, manipulating their bodies, their voices, their faces, and their personalities without ever veering into the realm of cliché. Their character work ranges from the profanely obvious to the sweetly subtle and the duo works wonderfully together, nimble enough to allow the other's characters to take necessary focus and generous enough to let go of the spotlight to let the other performer shine.

But far from relying on the conceit of its casting, the pair is well supported by the content of its material. David Sisco's script turns what could have been 60 minutes of dating disaster anecdotes into a more thoughtful look at the process of dating. He gives his characters stories and allows them to speak. Some stories are told through conversations, some through gestures, some through silences and some, in the case of one outlandishly enthusiastic Trekkie, through defense mechanisms. In its own way, the play seems to subtly suggest that yes, these people are strange and anti-social but if that was their sum total, what are they doing in the same room as Justin and Charlie?

BAIT is a funny play. It's buoyant, it's well directed (by Laura Josepher), it's intelligent, and even though I didn't agree with the choice of its conclusion, it contains a kernel of real wisdom because at the heart of its comedy there is the recognition of the damage that causes hope. I won't spoil the show by telling you how, but in some ways it recognizes that these crackpots are no different — that inherent in Justin and Charlie's lack of faith in the speed dating process is the hope that by merely showing up, a prince will emerge from this group of frogs and that a match can be manufactured not only in heavenly spheres, but in the very real confines of a Hell's Kitchen Howard Johnson's.

REVIEW: BAIT
Edge New York, April 12, 2008
by
Rob Lester, www.edgenewyork.com

Welcome to the world of Speed Dating, the potential-partner-sampling equivalent of a drive-through salad bar. It's a chance to meet, greet, access and assess a large number of singles. You see, by talking with each other for a few minutes, if you might want to date each other or would rather run for the hills if you ever saw him again. Bait, part of the Left Out Festival of LGBT-themed theatre presentations, reminds us how truly horrible - and probably accurate -- first impressions of new people can be. Sometimes the tip of the iceberg all we need or want to see, especially when that small sample is grating, rude, creepy, or instantly sleep-inducing.

Dating can be intimidating and a two-minute conversation can seem forever: claustrophobic, overwhelming, obnoxious, or just plain dull dull dull. Of course, it's hilarious when it's happening to somebody else -- onstage, anyway. And the laughs that "Bait" gets often sound like those laughs of recognition. We've all met people who make us instantly want to run away and hide, whether on a blind date, a bar, a party, in the seat next to us on an airplane, or a structured event like this. "Bait" captures that feeling of being trapped in a mini-version of The Date From Hell with many of these little encounters as "the normal guy" reacts to each successive weirdo, prig and jackass. The reactions here are key to the comedy and the actors excel at that as one Mr. Maybe takes a cell phone call in the middle of the allotted two minutes, one nearly drools with fervor as an obsessed sci-fi nerd, one a middle-aged Mama's boy who still lives with Mama, another is a very familiar, uh, face---recognized from porn films.

Sounds like a cast of thousands, but the play is performed by just two actors. Huh? Yup, that's its great achievement and well-met challenge, but also the reason it's hard to get emotionally involved or suspend any sense of disbelief. Entertaining and skillfully played as it is, "Bait" as performed this way succeeds more as a showcase for two chameleon-like actors turning on a dime time after time after time to play all the roles. Quite entertaining and admirable that is -- the way we revel in the skill of an impressionist imitating a dozen celebrity voices within one song or sketch. Thus, it's more of a tour de force acting display than it is an involving play this way. But on those terms, it's fun. The actors barely get a chance to blink between switches and bitches, except when bits of recorded music comes out to make ironic comment, like the old song "I Love Being Here With You" (...not!!).

In addition to the ever-changing parade of dates, there are two gay couples who are major characters. We have the two who are seemingly ex-lovers/ now friends with some leftover baggage and feelings who have come to play the field and play their chances. It's time they did so -- a place where people come to find dates is better than being thrown out of the supermarket for cruising in the produce aisle. (Or so they say before they enter). Then there are the almost interchangeable and cutely named Chad and Brad, lovers who run the structured event: ever so smiley and perky and prissy and pissy. Spouting rules and encouragement to the group like cheerleaders. The two squabble and talk through gritted teeth in between instructions whereupon the big stewardess-like smiles come on via automatic pilot blowing ever-ready whistle to signal that it's time for the players to move on to the next Mr. Right Over There to your right. Then, of course, one becomes that next possible partner for our "normal" (everything is relative) friend, wither Justin or Charlie.

David Sisco is the playwright and also half the cast-and the sound designer, too. There's an appealingly gawky sweetness that comes through in some of his characterizations. His co-star is Tom Gualtieri, who especially excels at characters who need a queer sneer and some edginess. Playing a series of revolving mostly mismatched couples, they are a good match onstage, playing well off each other. Using different accents and speech patterns, different energies and changing body language, they are able to make crisp, specific impressions even when the script has them present a new character with just one representative line and gesture before the next guy comes along.

It takes all kinds, as the multi-character piece reveals, but if the kind you like is the shirtless leather man seen in a photo in the publicity and playbill, keep your shirt on, because the actors do keep theirs on. Gay stereotypes run rampant, or swish and strut rampantly, here in some "bait-and-swish" prancing. But many of these guys are all too real. The play won six awards in the Columbus National Gay & Lesbian Theater Festival, including Best of Festival, with the same team, including director Laura Josepher who keeps all the plates spinning in the air without a feeling of exhaustion or franticness. She and the two men also manage to find a moment or two of humanity and tenderness near the end. Even in this torture chamber known as relationships and would-be/please-don't-be relationships, there's a glimmer of hope.