

THEATER REVIEW

Review: Money Grubbin' Whores

At the Lion Theatre at Theatre Row through October 19.

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Adam Mucci and Carmi Levite in "Money Grubbin' Whores." Photo by Zack DeZon.

A genuine Italian pizza joint is nothing if not a multi-purpose, American space, a place for family get-togethers, meetings, reunions, casual lunches. So it's pretty cheeky that Sean J. Quinn set his middle-class, dark comedy, *Money Grubbin' Whores*, now showing at the Lion Theater, in just such a cozy, recognizable space in New Jersey. But what goes down there over the course of the play is hardly a celebration -- not unless, of course, that's how you would classify a divorce negotiation.

In an interview with *The Daily News*, writer Quinn and director Brian Cichocki spoke about their joint venture, Hard Four Productions, which strives to "tell original stories that focus on the ever changing blue-collar journey in America." *Money Grubbin'*, in many ways, accomplishes that goal. It revels in the "everyman" schtick, as the first half of the show plays as an emotional back and forth between Irish Catholic plumber Matt, played in an emotional whirlwind by Adam Mucci, and his best friend since childhood, Frankie, played with bawdy wise-guy cum teddy-bear charm by James Andrew O'Connor. Their intense bromance is endearing, as Frankie, self-professed "deal closer", tries to lift Matt's spirits while also prepping him for the impending negotiation with his soon to be ex-wife and her "representative", the smarmy Moshe, played with Teflon sleaze by Penny Bittone.

The play unfolds with lopsided revelation. Before we've had a chance to see Aviva, the titular "money grubbin whore", we've heard her called every name in the book, accused of cruelty, and complimented only for her physical attributes. And, unsurprisingly, when Matt breaks down, in as many of a way as he can front -- "I'm like a fucking basket case" -- he admits that he's still in love with her and has no idea why their marriage has gone south. So Aviva's left to sweep in for the second half of the play and save as much face with the audience as she can, scrambling to get out her side of the story. But perhaps it's just too late, and the damage has already been done. "Money Grubbin' Whores," as a title, boldly asserts an aggressive and offensive claim, one which we expect the play to dispel. But by the time the play really starts to explore the subtleties of character, we've heard potential divorcee Matt call his wife the C-word and an unapologetic, gold-digging "whore" so many times, that no amount of stilted character building or bittersweet reconciliation and apology can put us at ease about the faults and somewhat static (or at least unsurprising) nature of their characters and relationship.

And yet, while the play feels far from revolutionary with its message, the heartfelt performances by the small yet mighty cast certainly make the play enjoyable. O'Connor and Bittone add a much needed levity and comedy, with their wacky physicality adding a comic dash of slapstick to the cramped basement setting. Hustling "deal makers", they offer a more generic viewpoint on the idea of love and success in America. Meanwhile, Matt and Aviva's roller-coasting emotions remind us that divorce is all too common in America -- the two "negotiators" have both been divorced themselves -- and yet, for those currently experiencing it, is uniquely painful and real. Carmi Levite, as Aviva, is especially believable as a woman broken down by her husband's rage, yet conflicted about committing to a solution with such legal and emotional finality.

Other small details add to the overall synchronicity of the performance. A notable example is a simple set addition, a classic piñata, ominously hanging a bit higher than it should, which speaks volumes of the complications that the play wants to address. It's a symbol of the ethnic blending of America -- the pizza place is decorated for an upcoming Mexican birthday party, Irish Catholic Matt is married to Israeli-Jewish Aviva, his best friend Matt is proudly Italian. It also serves as a stand in for the innocent child of the couple, Erin, who isn't there but whom we all know is bound to be hurt in the fallout.



James Andrew O'Connor and Penny Bittone in "Money Grubbin' Whores." Photo by Zack DeZon.

With no intermission, the play forces you to endure the pain of separation, anger, and confusion with no respite. Additionally, with no easy conclusion, *Whores* reminds us that marriage, or any serious relationship, means giving yourself to another person, and when that falls apart, no matter your race,

class, or creed, it just ain't pretty.

Money Grubbin' Whores continues its run at the Lion Theatre at Theater Row through October 19. For more information and tickets visit <http://www.mgwtheplay.com/>

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