

Shattered's Tough-Nosed Requiem' Pulls No Punches

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THEATER REVIEW

By **Chris Jones** theater critic
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"I caught it really bad tonight," cries the washed-up heavyweight Mountain McClintock, choking back the blood and trying to stop his brain from turning to mush. "What did I do wrong?"

"You aged," says his manager, a surrogate father now ready to turn his once-noble fighting horse into offal and glue.

Rich, compact,
and deliciously
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You've got to hand it to Rod Serling. Before "The Twilight Zone," he'd figured out the potential poignancy of a teleplay about the twilight of a boxer. In 1956, Serling penned "Requiem for a Heavyweight" for "Playhouse 90." A turning point in Serling's reputation, this was a story that proved resilient in many media.

Jack Palance played the Mountain. So did Sean Connery. And Anthony Quinn. But the emerging, intensely focused Chicago actor Sean Sullivan, a big man who's young for this role but entirely credible as a boxer, has some notable advantages over those famous names. For starters, his rock-solid Mountain comes in three dimensions.

And, in the tiny theater at the Victory Gardens, that destructive opening sequence



Sean Sullivan is Mountain McClintock and Brian McCartney is Army Hakes in *Shattered* at Globe Theatres
"Requiem For A Heavyweight"
Photo by Charles Shotwell

in the ring is fought, literally fought, about three feet from the front row. And no more than a dozen or so from the back. Not only can you viscerally experience the thud of the glove as it hits his decaying noggin, you might get sprayed with the wilting Mountain's sweat.

Granted, most lists of the great American playwrights of the 1950s would not include Serling's name. But Serling was a masterful storyteller who knew how to identify and exploit the thinly veiled fears of the American populace. And you could make a case that, with its early depiction of "dementia pugilistica," this piece was ahead of its time.

It's not a great play -- Serling laid on the pathos so thick you sometimes think you're watching Steinbeck's Lennie rather than a retired fighter. And not only did he create a sweet, less-than-credible angel to minister to the Mountain in his hour of need, he even named her character Grace (the charming and mercifully understated Paula Stevens does the honors in that role).

But I doubt much of that will bother you as you watch Lou Contey's rich, compact and deliciously entertaining production for the Shattered Globe Theatre, which has a long and passionate history of excellence in intense American works from this period. Concisely designed by Kevin Hagen, this

is one of those only-in-Chicago shows in which so many rough-hewn, folkishly challenged, middle-age, wholly authentic actors keep emerging from the back of the stage, you think there must be a factory back there churning them out.

In the roles of assorted hoodlums, thugs, grifters, exploiters and rough diamonds, there's a plethora of small, gutsy, macho performances from the likes of Don Blair, Jamie Vann and Scott Aiello. Brian McCartney, who plays the loyal second Army Hakes, is such a credibly good-hearted soul he gets you right where you live. And Bill Bannon, who plays the morally challenged manager Maish Resnick, certainly nails his character's ultimate crisis.

These performers -- who give all they've got -- don't get great prose or sustained scenes to wrap their chops around. But with dignity, honesty and truth, they tell the penny-dreadful story of a fighter's descent into the abyss. If you go for this era and style, you'll be right up there with a fallen pug.

"Requiem for a Heavyweight"

When: Through March 8

Where: Victory Gardens Greenhouse
Theater, 2257 N. Lincoln Ave.

Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes

Tickets: \$27-35 at 773-871-3000
