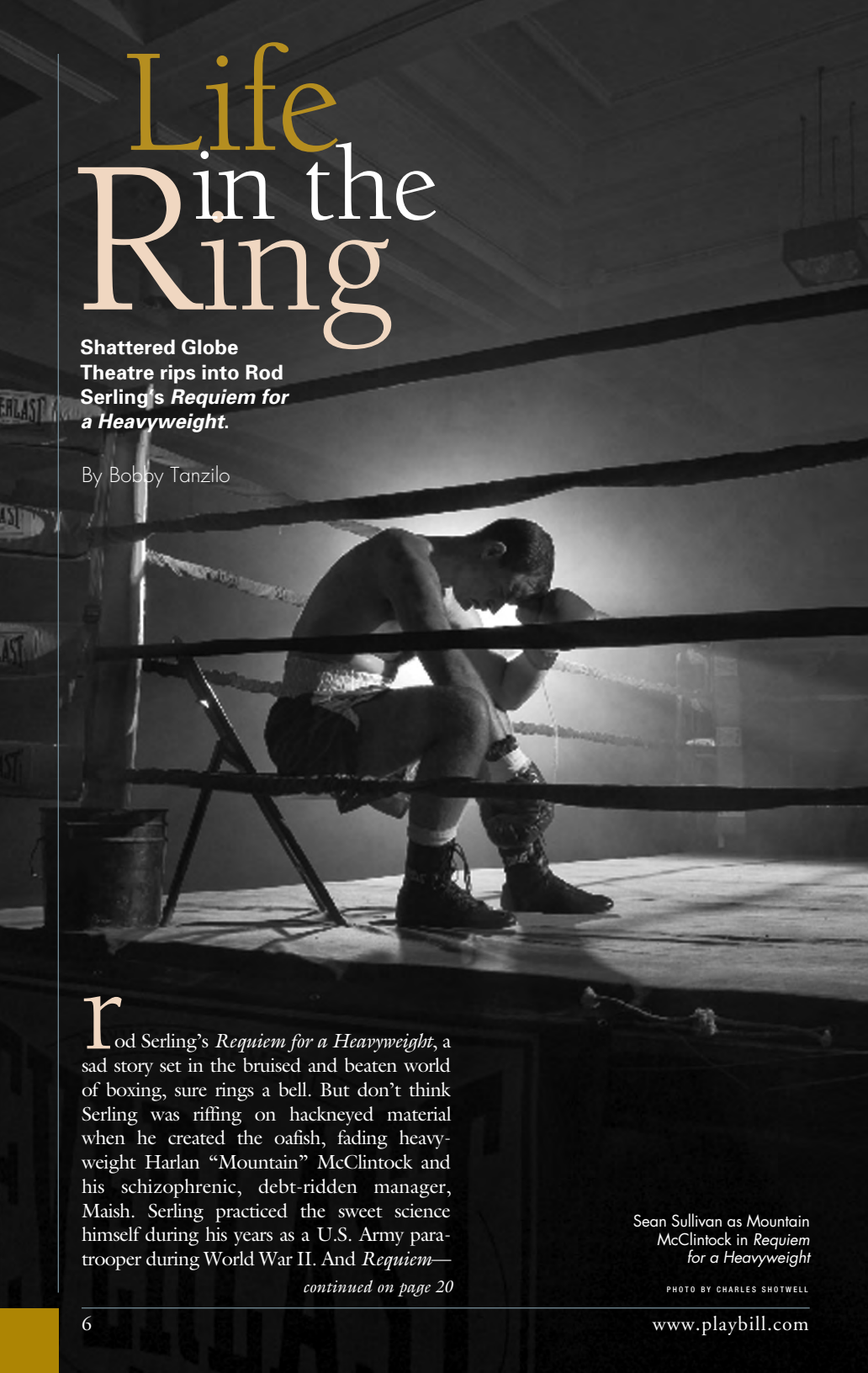


Life in the Ring

Shattered Globe
Theatre rips into Rod
Serling's *Requiem for
a Heavyweight*.

By Bobby Tanzilo



rod Serling's *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, a sad story set in the bruised and beaten world of boxing, sure rings a bell. But don't think Serling was riffing on hackneyed material when he created the oafish, fading heavy-weight Harlan "Mountain" McClintock and his schizophrenic, debt-ridden manager, Maish. Serling practiced the sweet science himself during his years as a U.S. Army paratrooper during World War II. And *Requiem*—

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Sean Sullivan as Mountain
McClintock in *Requiem
for a Heavyweight*

PHOTO BY CHARLES SHOTWELL

Requiem for a Heavyweight runs through early March at Shattered Globe.



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which he wrote for television in 1956—helped create the blueprint for these types of characters in the American consciousness.

The teleplay starred Jack Palance as McClintock and Keenan Wynn as Maish. In 1962 Anthony Quinn and Jackie Gleason did the story on the big screen. Meanwhile, the stage version, which Serling wrote himself, has had an enduring life on the stage; this month, Shattered Globe Theatre takes a shot at the hard-hitting drama.

“The play is a story about dignity and the struggle to claim one’s rightful place in the universe,” says director Louis Contey, who has directed a long list of works for Shattered Globe since its inception in 1991. “I was drawn to this story because I can relate to the notion that a greater destiny is sometimes just out of reach. How long does one hold on to the dream or expectation that what is due to you will eventually come if you are patient or tough enough to ride out the journey?”

Requiem, Contey says, is dynamic storytelling and that’s been one of Shattered Globe’s strengths over the years. The company, which produces one to three plays a season, draws on the familiar (*Of Mice and*

Men, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?) and the new (Nick Grosso’s *Real Classy Affair*, Jim McDermott’s *WarHawks & Lindberghs*). And several of its shows, like *Requiem*, have been familiar to movie buffs: *Judgment at Nuremberg*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, and *Meet John Doe*, the latter adapted by Contey and Dorrie Robinson.

“We have not consciously chosen to stage works that have become films,” *Requiem* co-producer Eileen Niccolai hastens to add. “Our play choices have more to do with the fact that our ensemble is drawn to strong, actor-driven plays that have great potential to grab an audience emotionally. We were strongly drawn to *Requiem for a Heavyweight* because of the way the play explores issues about human dignity and the sacrifices that must be made in order to maintain that dignity. It has the hallmarks of the kind of work that has been such a successful match between Shattered Globe and Lou in the past.”

The boxing world has changed dramatically since Serling wrote *Requiem*. The smoky arenas of the 1950s have been supplanted by the glitzy venues of Las Vegas



Director Louis Contey

and many of the working stiff's in the crowds have been replaced by high rollers. But, although boxing may not be central to sporting life in America as it once was, Contey is convinced audiences won't have any trouble immersing themselves in Serling's tale.

"The story is very accessible to begin with," he says. "The play's setting, the universe of boxing, is Serling's metaphor for

the rat race of humanity. We don't literally return home every night from work with cuts and bruises, bleeding profusely. In the real world those injuries are mental, internal. I find his storytelling to be very pure in this respect. What Serling was looking for in his characters was a humanity that isn't evident in everyday life. The world can be a cruel place and even those we trust can turn out to be very selfish and manipulative. What Mountain finds, even though he doesn't know he's looking for it, is that compassion, tenderness, forgiveness, and sensitivity really do exist and are available to anyone. Serling shows us a man who has no concept of these things because they've never been offered to him. His awakening to them is like waking from a coma after a decade and discovering that he has to start all over again, he must learn to be an individual for the very first time."

A show set in the ring presents special challenges. "Casting a play with very specific physical types, such as boxers, is always a daunting task," admits Contey. But he's confident he's found a champ in Sean Sullivan, who plays McClintock. Sullivan,




Sean Sullivan in *Requiem for a Heavyweight*

fresh off a production of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* with Lifeline Theater, has never laced up the gloves, but he says he's always been attracted to boxing. "I managed to catch a lot of good fights growing up," he recalls, "late at night on television, including the last Leonard–Hagler fight, Hearn–Spinks, Tyson–Douglas in Tokyo. I loved watching Roy Jones Jr. beat anybody."

Mountain McClintock has had some great years, but as the play opens, he's been beaten to a pulp; a doctor tells him his career is over. So, his cut man, Army—who has the unpleasant task of stemming the blood flow from facial cuts during bouts—takes him to an employment office where he meets the refined Grace Carney, who takes an interest in the battered pugilist. Meanwhile, Maish is neck-deep in debt and wants McClintock to keep fighting. While the one-two punch of Army and Grace may help Mountain get his life in order and move on with dignity, Maish works to undermine their efforts and introduces Mountain to the world of professional wrestling, with its flashy costumes and its scripted bouts. The question is, who

will move Mountain most? And will Mountain allow himself to be pushed around by anyone?

For Sullivan, the fighter is a paragon of complexity hidden beneath a mask of simplicity. "Mountain is, at a glance, a simple man," he observes, "earning a living with his fists, as he always has, going through the same routines, like he always does. And when that all that is broken, we see that there's so much more behind the simple things. He symbolizes, for me, the belief that at any given moment, any life in the world can be turned upside down, but there is an inherent resiliency within each of us, a fire, that keeps us on our feet, and drives us forward, beyond where we think we are capable of going. It's how we evolve. Life and its many changes push us past where we can push ourselves."

That same simple complexity, Sullivan explains, is at the heart of boxing. "The sweet science remains just that," he says, "a seemingly simple, complex array of passive aggression, attack and retreat, bob and weave, stick and move. So much going on, underneath the surface." 



CHARLES SHOTWELL