Written by Mike Schulz
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Black comedy is tough to pull off, and camp is even tougher, so it's no small praise to say that the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's production of *Ruthless* is a huge success. This savvy, ballsy musical about a mother-daughter duo who will literally kill to succeed in show biz is so mean and bitchy that it's sure to piss off or offend all the right people, and it's a credit to the comic subversion of the theatre's artistic director, Jay Berkow, that he chose *Ruthless* as the theatre's *Sound of Music* follow-up. The show is vicious and borderline inhuman … and I could barely see my notepad through my tears of laughter.

Ruthless, which has been superlatively directed by Michael Oberfield, has been described as *Gypsy* meets *The Bad Seed*, which would be appropriate if you added "meets *All About Eve* meets *Stella Dallas* meets *Mommie Dearest* meets the collected works of Douglas Sirk." *Ruthless* takes the tenets of its melodramatic forbears and twists them with maniacal glee; the characters are magnificently hateful, and the cast is smart enough to revel in their hatefulness. What results is not simply the funniest comedy the area has produced in many a moon but the *smartest*, a brilliantly entertaining piece given exquisite treatment by all involved, particularly leading players Katherine Walker Hill, Simone Renault, and Gregory Harrell.

Honesty time: I am in love with Katherine Walker Hill, and I don't care who knows it. Her performance as Maria in *The Sound of Music* was marvelous, but nothing could have prepared me for the exquisite comic panache of her work here. I'm not certain how Hill has so fully tapped into her necessary 1950s mindset, but the results are extraordinary. At different points in *Ruthless*, she's asked to play Donna Reed, Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck , Joan Crawford, and Lana Turner, and not once does Hill slip out of character to wink at the audience. Hill appears to be doing about eight caricatures at once, and all of them are spectacularly assured.

Simone Renault, who plays Hill's nightmarish daughter, already displays tougher focus and sharper comic timing than most performers three times her age. Renault, who doesn't have an ounce of "cutesy" on her, is one of the most polished child actors I've ever seen onstage; every word she utters – or shrieks – sounds fiercely believable. Physically, Renault and Walker match each other beautifully, and are both so staggeringly funny that they easily make up for occasional pitch problems; when these two go at each other's throats, the sight would be horrifying if the actors weren't making you laugh so hard.

Gregory Harrell's first appearance as talent scout Sylvia St. Croix is a bit of a shocker. With his burly frame squeezed into *outré* fortune-teller garb, and with his garish makeup giving him the demented fervor of Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*, he's the *femme fatale* as a bruiser, as if Divine were channeling Jake LaMotta. Yet Harrell is so inspired that, within his first scene, you nearly forget about the drag act; he stretches out his vowels and glares at his co-stars with haughty disdain, and the results are devastatingly enjoyable. Harrell looks like he's having the time of his life in *Ruthless*, and watching him, you'd be hard-pressed not to feel the same.

Given less to do, the rest of the show's ensemble makes vivid impressions by – fittingly – coming off as completely mad. Nicole Horton's dryness plays off the others' hysteria beautifully, Allison Hendrix plays her potentially psychopathic Eve Harrington-wannabe with great physical abandon, and Jalayne Riewerts shows up as Judy's mother, a noxious, female Addison DeWitt, and drops withering *bon mots* with aplomb. It might seem like sour grapes to point out that the show's conception of the bile-spewing theatre critic is its least successful one – like many of the show's inside-theatre gags, it's smarter than it is funny – but Riewerts certainly performs the role well. (There's also an uncredited, most welcome 11th-hour cameo by a seventh cast member, who gives the precise definition of a *flawless* line reading.)

Any one of these performances would be reason enough to catch *Ruthless*, and if I had time enough, I'd not only see *Ruthless again*, but I'd drag every single one of my friends along with me. The Clinton Showboat has three mainstage productions left in its 2005 season; I'm not sure they'll be able to top *Ruthless*, but I can't wait to see them try.