

Review: 'Dirty Rotten Scoundrels'

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John Lithgow and [Norbert Leo Butz](http://variety.com/t/norbert-leo-butz/) are the new "Dirty Rotten [Scoundrels](http://variety.com/t/scoundrels/)" at the Old Globe, taking over the con games played by suave Michael Caine and sly Steve Martin in the 1988 film of the same name. A world premiere, pre-Broadway tryout, tuner supplies entertaining and occasionally inspired moments. But the show, given its subject, has a lightweight quality. It lacks a tough-enough, diamond-hard edge. Lithgow, an accomplished comedian, and Butz, who possesses formidable acting and singing chops, lean too much toward lovability, and frequently seem so inept that it's difficult to believe any reasonably sane woman would look favorably on their harebrained schemes.

Lithgow plays Lawrence Jameson, a British con artist, and he's smoothly amusing at first, masquerading as a deposed prince who needs money for his war-torn country and worming funds out of the gullible Muriel Eubanks of Omaha (Joanna Gleason). The show remains on track when he meets Freddy (Norbert Leo Butz) on a train and overhears the brash American manipulator duping a female passenger into feeding him. Freddy doesn't know Lawrence is a con artist until Muriel inadvertently tips him off to Lawrence's true vocation.

Wised up, the young hustler invades Lawrence's French Riviera villa and pressures the master into teaching him the tricks of the trade. Lawrence reluctantly agrees, pronouncing Freddy "so deliciously low" in a spoof of Professor Higgins in "My Fair Lady" and urging the interloper to know his limitations ("You're a moron").

Some of the story's most promising episodes go off the rails. To escape the clutches of Jolene (Sara Gettelfinger), an heiress from Oklahoma, Lawrence exposes her to his bogus half-witted brother Ruprecht (Butz again). But this potentially uproarious sequence is so drawn out and broadly played that it falls flat.

David Yazbek's music is short on specific flavor and generally is used to support his comedic lyrics. His words, which deliberately twist lines like pretzels, are effective in numbers such as "Ruffhousin' mit Schuffhausen," and "Love Is My Legs," a spoof of conventional love songs dealing with Freddy's ecstasy after he pretends to be wheelchair-bound to win the sympathy of American soap queen Christine Colgate ([Sherie Rene Scott](http://variety.com/t/sherie-rene-scott/) (<http://variety.com/t/sherie-rene-scott/>)).

Some of Yazbek's titles are awkward ("Nothing Is Too Wonderful to Be True") and one ballad, "Love Sneaks In," is a slack note that easily could be eliminated. Overall, however, his songs have a refreshing, enjoyable bounce.

Lithgow benefits from his towering height and undeniable presence, but director Jack O'Brien lets him get away with too much mugging, which dissipates any illusion of character validity. He appears uncomfortable in dancing routines, despite some elegance.

Although no con man has ever been as abrasive a klutz as Butz — he grabs breasts and talks of milkshake enemas — his wild portrayal has a lunatic grandeur. He's at his best belting out "Great Big Stuff," an oily ode to self-adoration, and his agonized expression when Lithgow, as a phony German medical specialist, smashes his supposedly paralyzed legs, is memorably funny.

Since the main situations lumber more than levitate, room is left for two supporting actors to run away with the show. Gleason brings cockeyed honesty and feeling to her role as Muriel of Omaha, and Gregory Jbara, playing a corrupt police chief reminiscent of Claude Rains in "Casablanca," is a perfect counterpart. When they dance, there's genuine communication between them — aided by Jerry Mitchell's choreography — and a sense of letdown ensues after the plot [sets \(http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/sets-stages/\)](http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/sets-stages/) them aside and returns to its slapstick roots.

Scott's soap queen, introduced too late into the story, is a fine singer and comic, and O'Brien's direction properly spotlights the empty-headed naivete that disguises her nefarious goals. David Rockwell's scenic design puts her in a pink bedroom with fuchsia bedspread, immersing her in such gaudy colors that it's a miracle she emerges distinct above the decor.

The overall unevenness of tone is summed up when Lithgow says, "I never take advantage of the poor and virtuous," a surprise since his Lawrence has never expressed any scruples. What we need to see is some good, old-fashioned villainy.

Dirty Rotten Scoundrels

Old Globe, San Diego; 612 seats; \$75 top

Production

An Old Globe presentation of a musical in two acts with music and lyrics by David Yazbek, book by Jeffrey Lane. Based on the film "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," written by Dale Launer and Stanley Shapiro & Paul Henning, by special arrangement with Dirty Rotten [Producers \(http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/producers/\)](http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/producers/) in association with MGM OnStage. Directed by Jack O'Brien. Musical direction by Ted Sperling.

Creative

Choreography, Jerry Mitchell. [Sets \(http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/sets-stages/\)](http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/sets-stages/), David Rockwell; lighting, Kenneth Posner; costumes, Gregg Barnes; sound, Acme Sound Partners; stage manager, Michael Brunner. Opened and reviewed Sept. 22, 2004; runs through Oct. 31. Running time: 2 HOURS, 45 MIN.

Cast

Andre Thibault - Gregory Jbara Lawrence Jameson - John Lithgow Muriel Eubanks - Joanna Gleason Freddy Benson - Norbert Leo Butz Jolene Oakes - Sara Gettelfinger Christine Colgate - Sherie Rene Scott

With: Timothy J. Alex, Andrew Asnes, Roxane Barlow, Joe Cassidy, Julie Connors, Rachel deBenedet, Laura Marie Duncan, Sally Mae Dunn, Rick Faugno, Tom Galantich, Jason Gillman, Amy Heggins, Grasan Kingsberry, Rachelle Rak, Tony Yazbeck.

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