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Globe's 'Dirty Rotten Scoundrels' is a witty, wonderful smash

By: PAM KRAGEN - Staff Writer MIDNIGHT SEPT. 23, 2004

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Smart, sassy, stylish and fall-out-of-your-seat funny, the Globe's new musical "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" is a celluloid predecessor and will very soon make a Broadway sensation out of its composer/lyricist David Yazbek.

Yazbek, whose first Globe-born musical, "The Full Monty," was nominated for 12 Tony Awards (but won none in the 2001 "The Producers" shutout), would be smart to clear some space on his mantel. Since Stephen Sondheim, there hasn't been a Broadway lyricist with the same breadth of wit or uncanny rhyming ability as Yazbek. Who else could dream up lyrics like:

"my little piece of heaven, Oklahoma/where the leading cause of death is melanoma" or the limerick-like "the Bushes of Tex were nervous wrecks because their son was dim ... but look what happened to him."

From French song parodies to tangos, and Cole Porter-style ballads to raunchy in-your-face rock, the wide-ranging "Scoundrels" score deserves equal star billing with its stellar cast of John Lithgow, Norbert Leo Butz, Sherie Rene Scott and Joanna Gleason.

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Everything about the Globe production -- which transfers to Broadway next February -- is first-class. From Jack O'Brien's breezy, adroit direction to Lithgow and Butz's charismatic pairing to Jeffrey Lane's bright and hilarious book to David Rockwell's sparkling and perpetually whirling French Riviera set, "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" has all the makings of a Broadway classic.

Based on (and much better than) the 1988 movie starring Michael Caine and Steve Martin, "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" is the story of two con men competing for the fortunes of wealthy women on the French Riviera -- the sophisticated but bored continental playboy Lawrence Jameson (Lithgow) and low-class American crook Freddy Benson (Butz). Lawrence convinces eager socialites he's an exiled prince in dire need of cash for his fictional country's revolution. Freddy tells women he needs money for both a legless granny and a pricey psychiatrist to treat his tragic "dance fever" malady.

In a Pygmalion-style challenge, Lawrence takes on Freddy as his apprentice in crime, but when the student proves better than the teacher, they begin competing for the riches of apple-cheeked American soap heiress Christine Colgate (Scott), with the agreement that whoever loses the contest must leave town for good.

Lithgow's Lawrence (described in song by one fleecing victim as "magically long of lash/tragically short of cash") is as effortlessly elegant as he is hilariously narcissistic (in one of the script's funniest lines, Lawrence adoringly compares his own fleshy derriere to that of Michelangelo's David). And the petite, buoyant and brassy Butz oozes with slightly sleazy charm, faking a psychosomatic paralysis to win Christine's heart and wallet. The onstage pairing of these two gifted comedians is magic and their show-stopping second-act duet, "Dirty, Rotten ...," brings down the house.

Yazbek's songwriting skill is at its best when he writes for these two very different characters. Freddy's songs are rough-edged with intentionally banal lyrics (in "Great Big Stuff," he dreams of naked Twister, fur seats, a private Zamboni machine and a case of gout), while Lawrence's silky solos ("Love Sneaks In" is performed, Sinatra-style, against a moonlit lamppost) have Noel Coward-like panache.

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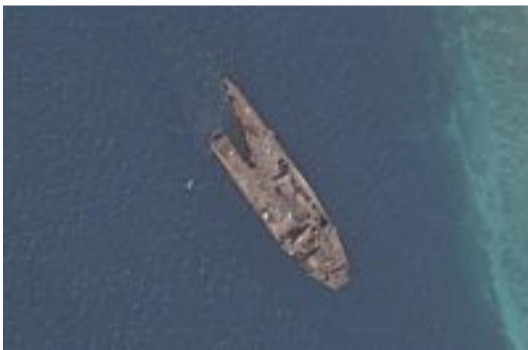


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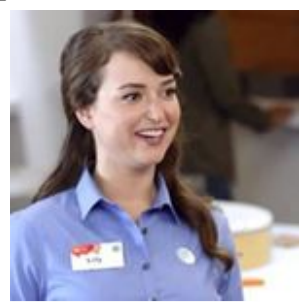
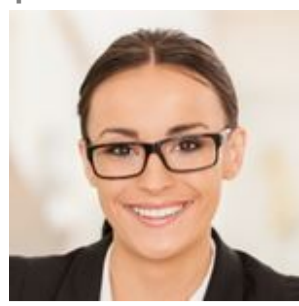


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