

The Art of the Con, Reprised

By **BEN BRANTLEY** MARCH 4, 2005

IS there room on Broadway for another odd couple of singing con men? On paper, "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," which opened last night at the Imperial Theater, has an awful lot in common with the musical megahit "The Producers": a mismatched pair of scam artists (one a silky veteran, one a raw rookie); a long-legged blonde as a love interest for both fellows; a bubbly score; comic homages to showbiz classics; and the aim of vaulting over the lines of good taste whenever possible.

But if you are going to court comparison with giants, you had better be prepared to stand tall. "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," directed by Jack O'Brien and starring John Lithgow and Norbert Leo Butz as the title rogues, somehow never straightens out of a queasy slouch.

Though shot through with bawdy jokes, smirky innuendoes and a rowdy spirit of self-parody, "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" seems to believe in its own brazen agenda only when Mr. Butz, a criminally talented young performer, is allowed to command the stage. And confidence, as any grifter can tell you, is the irreplaceable basis of a successful con game.

"Give them what they want," sings the preternaturally dapper Lawrence Jameson (Mr. Lithgow) in the show's opening number, of his vocation as a swindler of stinking-rich women in a Riviera resort. What the public wanted four years ago was "The Producers," Mel Brooks's blockbuster adaptation of his own movie about dirty dealings on Broadway. The glare cast by "The Producers" was so bright that another, more modest but eminently likable musical was thrust into the shadows.

The show was "The Full Monty," a sweet-natured tale of unemployed men who find their dignity in becoming strippers for a night, and its creators saw the

brassier "Producers" wipe the floor with it at the Tony Awards and at the box office. Now much of the same creative team -- director (Mr. O'Brien), songwriter (David Yazbek) and choreographer (Jerry Mitchell) -- have returned with the mission of really giving Broadway audiences what they want this time.

The problem is that none of these truly gifted folks -- and let me extend that description to embrace Mr. Lithgow and Sherie Rene Scott, who plays the pigeon waiting to be plucked -- are in their natural element in "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," adapted from the 1988 movie starring Michael Caine and Steve Martin. Mr. O'Brien, whose credits range improbably from the current "Hairspray" to the spectacular Lincoln Center production of "Henry IV" in 2003, may well be the American stage's most protean director these days.

But whether dealing with fat men in housecoats, Shakespearean barflies or clothes-shucking middle-aged schlemiels, Mr. O'Brien has always exuded a kindly courtesy toward the characters in his shows. The same glow emanated from Mr. Yazbek's score for "The Fully Monty" in songs that found a charming pop lyricism in blue-collar malaise.

With "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," which has a book by Jeffrey Lane, Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Yazbek seem to be saying: "O.K., world, you want showbiz razzle-dazzle? We can do that. You want shameless? We'll give you that, too." So out come the ribald puns; the scatological and sex jokes; the undulating, overdressed chorus lines; and a hard-sell title song underlined in brass.

At the same time, the show respectfully follows the formulas of the Golden-Age book musical, right down to a comic romantic subplot for two eccentric supporting characters (Gregory Jbara, trapped in a French accent, as a crooked police chief and Joanna Gleason as a swinging American divorcée in a wardrobe of spoof status clothes designed by Gregg Barnes). And like "The Producers," it pauses now and again for self-conscious winks at progenitors like "My Fair Lady" and "Oklahoma!"

What's missing is the galvanizing, hypnotizing energy that might make you forget that these ingredients appear to have been assembled according to an oft-checked shopping list for a borrowed recipe. There is equally little evidence of the one thing that no successful double con act can do without, chemistry between its two perpetrators. In this case, that means Mr. Lithgow's rakish Lawrence and Mr. Butz's Freddy, a happy vulgarian in search of some class.

Chemistry wasn't a problem in Frank Oz's film of 17 years ago, which traded

on its audience's existing awareness of the star personae of Mr. Caine (suave, deadpan, devilish) and Mr. Martin (antic, goofy, outrageous). Though he won a Tony playing a nastier kind of smoothie in "Sweet Smell of Success," the ill-fated musical of 2002, Mr. Lithgow is most comfortable looking perplexed and deferential onstage, as he did in the drama "M. Butterfly." (For the record, he can be a first-rate movie villain.)

With a wavy coif and outlined eyes that give him the epicene look of a 1920's movie idol, Mr. Lithgow gamely preens and postures as the vain, guileful Lawrence, the crook deluxe of the French seaside gambling town of Beaumont-sur-Mer. (As designed by David Rockwell, the town bears a been-there resemblance to the Riviera landscape in the current revival of "La Cage aux Folles.")

But you can feel the strain behind Mr. Lithgow's performance, especially when he has to be extravagantly wicked or daring. Though he does fine by a Rex Harrison-style patter number, he is most at home in a wistful, wispy ballad Lawrence sings in the second act.

A quality of eager impersonation also infuses the performance of Ms. Scott (of the original Broadway cast of "Aida") as Christine Colgate, the ostensibly sweet and klutzy target of the show's central scam. (A bombshell blonde with a big voice, she's a gladiola pretending to be a shrinking violet.) But Mr. Butz, who single-handedly made the unfortunate "Thou Shalt Not" bearable a few years back, is definitely the real thing.

The possessor of a Puckish face and a Buddha belly, Mr. Butz also has the ability to switch on at will a vocal and comic power that jolts an audience to attention. "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" most noticeably comes to life with Freddy's self-introductory number, "Great Big Stuff," an inspired parody of the hip-hop odes to the materialism of music videos.

"Great Big Stuff" elicits Mr. Yazbek's sophisticated knack, much needed on Broadway, for both satirizing and exploiting top-40 musical sensibilities. It's a skill that is also gleefully evident in a syrupy second-act duet for Freddy and Christine that brings to mind those tonsil-stretching romantic movie theme songs from the 1980's. And the show's climactic number, its title song, is aggressively catchy enough to bring down the house. There is also an unbearably shrill hoe-down number performed by Sara Gettelfinger as an heiress from Oklahoma.

Otherwise, Mr. Yazbek's score brings to mind the sort of 1960's pop melodies of Henry Mancini (especially those written for caper flicks) and Burt Bacharach

that live on translated into elevator music. They are tunes that simmer softly in the background, which is not what this kind of musical requires. The lyrics, also by Mr. Yazbek, drop a lot of brand names and are cheerfully, clunkily cheesy. ("If music be the food of love, he ate my smorgasbord," sings Ms. Gleason, whose delivery throughout is so deadpan as to verge on posthumous.)

This tone is, it should be noted, of a piece with the carefully structured script by Mr. Lane, who appears to be under obligation to keep the corn flying as if it were tornado season in Kansas in August. ("Her people are in oil." "Crude?" "Well, she is a little pushy.")

Summing up his friend and rival Freddy in the play's final scene, Lawrence observes, "What you lack in grace, you certainly make up for in vulgarity." These would appear to be words to live by for the creators of "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels." But the show just doesn't have the self-belief, not to mention the oomph, that can make vulgarity a fine art.

'Dirty Rotten Scoundrels'

Book by Jeffrey Lane; music and lyrics by David Yazbek, based on the film "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" written by Dale Launer and Stanley Shapiro and Paul Henning. Directed by Jack O'Brien; choreographed by Jerry Mitchell; musical direction and incidental music arrangements by Ted Sperling. Sets by David Rockwell; costumes by Gregg Barnes; lighting by Kenneth Posner; sound by Acme Sound Partners; associate choreographer, Denis Jones; orchestrations, Harold Wheeler; vocal music arrangements, Mr. Sperling and Mr. Yazbek; dance music arrangements, Zane Mark; conductor, Fred Lassen; music coordinator, Howard Joines; executive producers, Marty Bell/Aldo Scrofani. Presented by Mr. Bell, David Brown, Mr. Scrofani, Roy Furman, Dede Harris, Amanda Lipitz, Greg Smith, Ruth Hendel, Chase Mishkin, Barry and Susan Tatelman, Debra Black, Sharon Karmazin, Joyce Schweickert, Bernie Abrams/Michael Speyer, Barbara Whitman, Weissberger Theater Group/Jay Harris, Cheryl Wiesenfeld/Jean Cheever, Clear Channel Entertainment and Harvey Weinstein, in association with MGM on Stage/Darcie Denkert and Dean Stolber. At the Imperial Theater, 249 West 45th Street, Manhattan, (212)239-6200. Running time: 2 hours 35 minutes.

WITH: John Lithgow (Lawrence Jameson), Norbert Leo Butz (Freddy), Joanna Gleason (Muriel Eubanks), Gregory Jbara (André), Sara Gettelfinger (Jolene Oakes) and Sherie Rene Scott (Christine Colgate).

