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Witty 'Resurrection Blues' is not your grandfather's Miller

By: PAM KRAGEN - Staff Writer MIDNIGHT MARCH 31, 2004

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Comedy isn't a word American playwrights have come to associate with Arthur Miller, but in his 2002 play "Resurrection Blues," the octogenarian playwright proves he's a master of all forms.

Wittily directed by Mark Lamos, "Resurrection Blues" makes a pleasing West Coast premiere at the Old Globe Theatre. The fast-paced and funny play takes a sly and surprisingly timely poke at our culture's self-absorption and the

media's power to control our lives and religious beliefs.

When Miller wrote "Resurrection Blues" in 2002, he couldn't have known that Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" would today be a box office smash, with patrons queuing up to watch Jesus' torture and crucifixion and to buy souvenir crucifixion nails. In "Resurrection Blues," infantile South American dictator/general Felix Barriaux plans to crucify a godlike rebel and has sold the TV broadcast rights to an American TV conglomerate for \$75 million.

The dictator, played with hilariously deadpan comic timing by John de Lancie, doesn't care much that the rebel, nicknamed "Ralph," can inexplicably illuminate his body and walk through walls. The crucifixion means big bucks for his unnamed country (which, after a three-year civil war, is crumbling into decay), and he's not about to let the rebel's apparent divinity sway him from depositing the check.



Observing sadly from the sidelines is Miller himself, here depicted as Felix's world-weary cousin Henri Schultz, heir to a pharmaceuticals fortune. Henri (played with naturalism and a sense of sad inevitability by Daniel Davis) appeals to Felix and the American TV producers to stop the execution. He suspects Ralph's messianic qualities because of the miracle healing he conducted on Henri's suicidal daughter, Jeanine, who jumped from a building after Ralph's arrest and crushed her spine. Like the melancholy Jacques in "As You Like It," Henri's often-barbed critiques on society always strike with deadly accuracy.

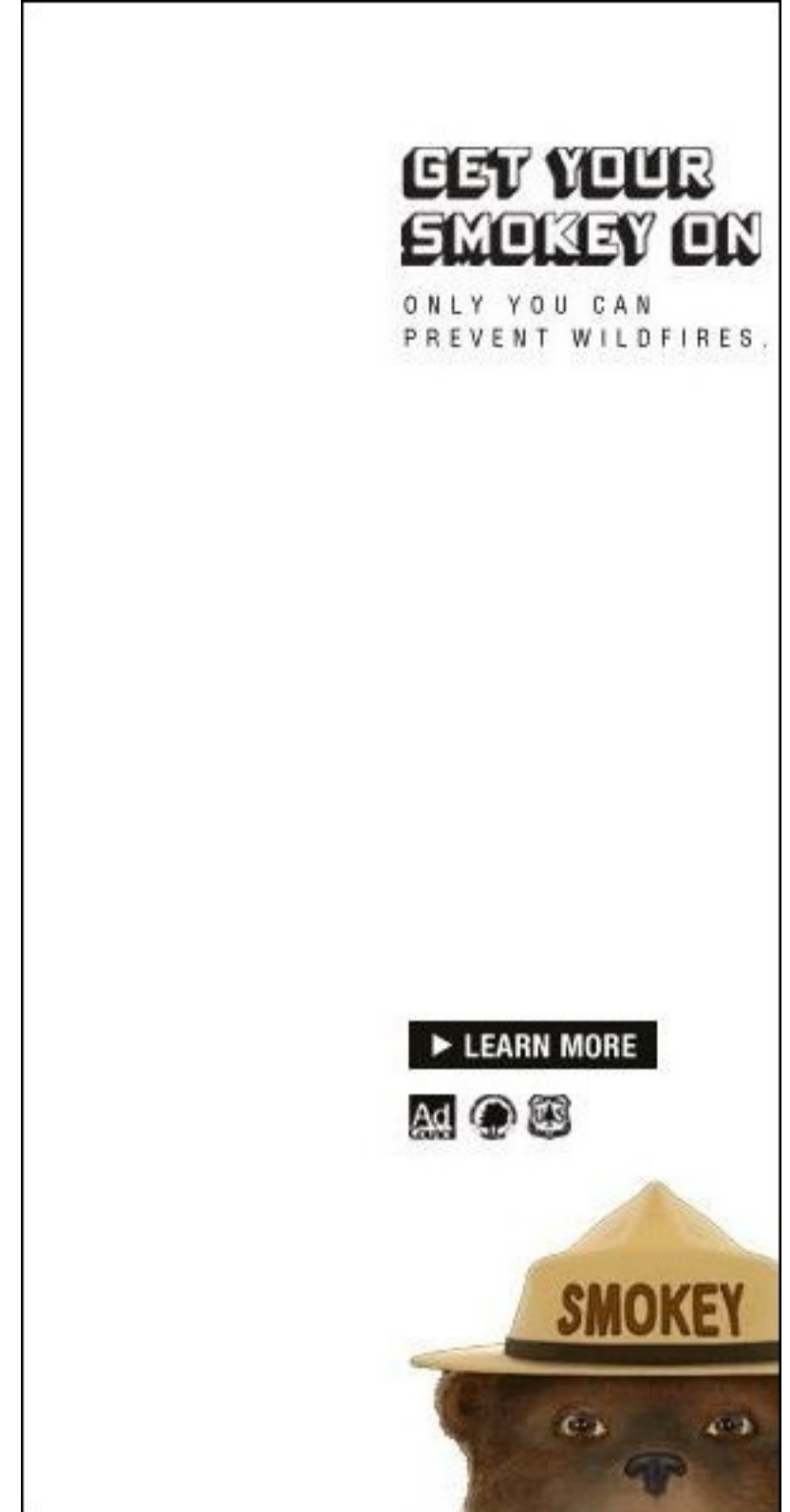
In previous stagings, "Resurrection Blues" earned mixed reviews, mostly for its overlong exposition and preachy middle scenes between Henri and his daughter. Miller has made some substantial edits on his script, and under Lamos' direction, the acting is broad and the emphasis is on funny.

Part of the fun of the play is the American TV crew, led by the aptly named Skip L. Cheeseboro (played with smarmy self-interest by Chris Henry Coffey) and the socially conscious director Emily Shapiro (a light, bright, bubbly Jennifer Regan). Emily backs out of filming the execution and instead uses her Eva Peron-like sexual charms on the impotent general Felix to get him to cancel the killing (or so she thinks).

Ralph, who is only seen in the play as a bathing beam of light, ultimately works his magic on all of the characters in the play. Is he real, as the besotted Jeanine believes, or is he a figment of everyone's imagination? The only character who seems to know for sure is his disciple Stanley, a drug-addled burnout (played hilariously in George Carlin hippie-dippie style by Bruce Bohne). In his rather loopy philosophy, Stanley believes Ralph is simply whatever each person wants him to be.

The play's first act introduces the characters and their dilemmas in linear fashion, and the loose second act surprises with a few twists and turns. The play moves along at a breezy clip, running two hours, 10 minutes, with intermission.

The production's set (stylized red mountains on which the words of a constitution are emblazoned in Spanish) is by Riccardo Hernandez, with costumes by Lewis Brown and lighting by York Kennedy. Paul Peterson designed the sound.



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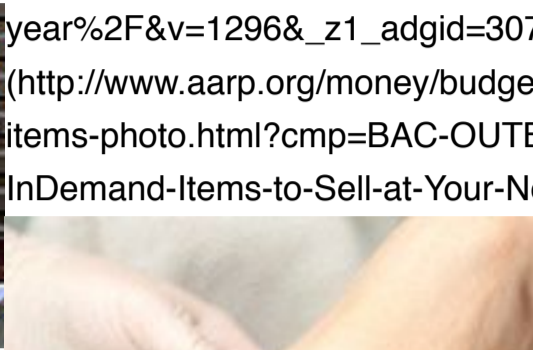
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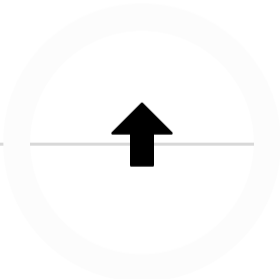
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