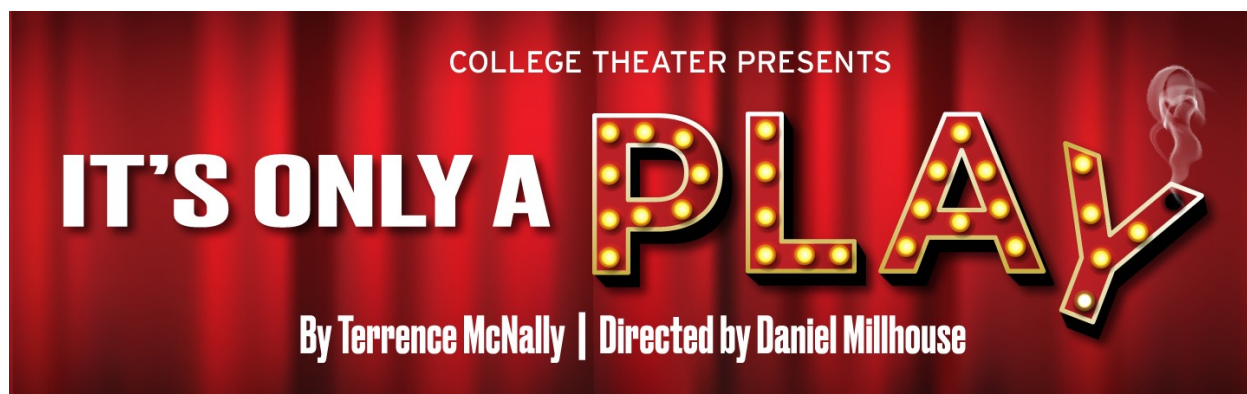


College of DuPage Theater Department

Presents

It's Only a Play

By Terrence McNally



Directed by Daniel Millhouse

The College Theater Department sincerely thanks the library for research support, for classes studying the script and production, as well as for the cast, director, and production team working on the project.

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Play/Production Information

Brief Synopsis

It's opening night of *The Golden Egg* on Broadway. Playwright Peter Austin anxiously awaits to see if his new show is a hit. With his career on the line, he shares his big night with his best friend, a television star, a wealthy/novice producer, new-in-town diva singer, his genius director, a lethal drama critic, and a fresh-off-the-bus coat check attendant. It's alternately raucous, ridiculous and tender – the play is sure to be the hit they have all been hoping for.

Time and Place

The time of the play is 2014.

The place of the play is Julia Budder's Townhouse in New York City.

Characters

Peter Austin - The playwright. Everything is riding on tonight.

Julia Budder - The producer. Attractive and genuinely nice.

Ira Drew - The critic. Wears glasses and has food stains on his tie.

Frank Finger - The director. Soon to be knighted.

Virginia Noyes - The star. She has an electronic bracelet on her ankle.

James Wicker - The best friend. He used to be a stage actor.

Gus P. Head - The temporary help. Fresh off the farm.

Note: Contains adult themes and language

It's Only a Play Director's Note

Spring 2025

Welcome to the dazzling, chaotic, and utterly theatrical world of *It's Only a Play*! Terrence McNally's sharp-witted comedy throws open the doors to Broadway's backstage, where egos are fragile, ambition is fierce, and success and failure hang in the balance of a single review.

At its heart, this play is a love letter to the theater (in all of its brilliance and absurdity) and the resilient artists who bring it to life. We revel in the camaraderie and the competition, the high stakes and the heartbreak, and the desperate need for validation that drives so many creatives. In a world where opinions are instantaneous and social media serves as the new critic's column, McNally's exploration of artistic insecurity and fame feels more relevant than ever.

In this production, we embrace the play's meta-theatrical nature, balancing heightened theatricality with raw vulnerability. We lean into the lavish setting, the biting humor, and the sheer theatricality of it all because, in the end, theater is larger than life, and that is exactly why we love it.

So sit back and enjoy the ride. Laugh with us, groan with us, and celebrate the messy, wonderful world of live theater. After all, it's only a play... or is it?

About the Author: Terrence McNally

Terrence McNally (1938–2020) was one of America’s most celebrated playwrights, known for his sharp wit, insightful social commentary, and deep exploration of human relationships. Over a career spanning six decades, McNally’s work touched on themes of art, identity, love, and the role of theater in society. His plays often balanced humor and poignancy, revealing the complexities of human nature and the power of connection.

Born in St. Petersburg, Florida, and raised in Texas, McNally developed a passion for theater early in life. He attended Columbia University, where he studied under renowned literary figures and honed his writing skills. His early career saw collaborations with icons such as John Steinbeck, for whom he worked as a personal assistant.

McNally’s breakthrough came in the 1960s with works that challenged conventions and showcased his unique voice. His ability to blend comedy with deep emotional resonance became a hallmark of his writing. Among his most famous plays are *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, *Master Class*, *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*, and *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*, each demonstrating his keen understanding of character and narrative.

It’s Only a Play, originally written in 1978 and later revised for a highly successful 2014 Broadway revival, is a quintessential McNally work. It is a comedic yet affectionate look at the theater world, filled with biting satire, industry in-jokes, and a celebration of the relentless passion that drives artists.

Beyond his plays, McNally was a prolific writer for musical theater, contributing the books for *Ragtime*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and *The Full Monty*, among others. His works earned him multiple Tony Awards, a Drama Desk Award, and a Pulitzer Prize nomination, solidifying his legacy in American theater.

McNally was also a trailblazer in LGBTQ+ representation in theater, fearlessly addressing issues of identity and acceptance in a time when such themes were often marginalized. His work paved the way for future generations of playwrights to tell authentic, diverse stories.

Terrence McNally’s influence on modern theater is immeasurable. His plays continue to be performed worldwide, reminding audiences of the power of storytelling to entertain, challenge, and inspire. *It’s Only a Play* serves as both a love letter to the theatrical community and a testament to McNally’s enduring wit and wisdom.



Articles for your Consideration

Laughter with a Bite: The Power of Satire

Terrence McNally's *It's Only a Play* is a sharp-witted satire that affectionately pokes fun at the theater industry while also offering a pointed critique of its many eccentricities. The play's humor is rooted in its characters (each a recognizable archetype of the theater world) including the anxious playwright, the self-absorbed leading lady, the jaded critic, and the hopeful newcomer. McNally uses these figures to explore the high stakes of opening night, where careers can be made or broken by a single review, and the emotional turmoil that accompanies such a pivotal moment in an artist's career. The heightened reactions, over-the-top anxieties, and desperate need for validation all contribute to a hilarious yet poignant exploration of the entertainment business.

Satire in *It's Only a Play* is particularly effective in how it exposes the vanity, desperation, and relentless ambition that often drive theater professionals. The exaggerated responses of the characters to critics' reviews highlight the industry's obsession with validation, while the play's many inside jokes about Broadway culture create a sense of authenticity and camaraderie with audiences familiar with the scene. From biting commentary on the unpredictability of commercial success to critiques of the politics behind awards and casting decisions, McNally crafts a world that reflects both the exhilaration and absurdity of show business. The play's humor is not just limited to the dialogue; its very structure, filled with dramatic reveals and chaotic energy, mirrors the unpredictable nature of theater itself. The characters embody familiar struggles that actors, directors, and producers face, making the humor feel all the more grounded in reality.

However, McNally's satire is never cruel. It comes from a place of love for the art form, celebrating its resilience despite its flaws. While the play lampoons the fragility of egos and the fickle nature of the industry, it also underscores the unwavering passion that fuels theater practitioners. The characters may be vain and self-obsessed, but they are also deeply invested in their work, revealing a touching vulnerability underneath the comedic exaggeration. Through humor, *It's Only a Play* offers a self-reflective look at an industry that thrives on both creative passion and brutal competition, illustrating how artists continue to create and perform despite the harsh realities they face. It is this balance between satire and admiration that makes the play both insightful and enduringly entertaining. By the end of the play, the audience is left with an appreciation for the wild, unpredictable world of theater and the people who dedicate their lives to it.

McNally also makes a pointed observation about the larger-than-life egos that populate the theater world. The characters in *It's Only a Play* are exaggerated to emphasize their insecurities and vanity, but in doing so, McNally highlights a fundamental truth about the industry: success and failure are deeply personal. In the world of Broadway, a rave review can validate years of struggle, while a scathing critique can send an artist into despair. This tension between triumph and defeat is what makes the play so engaging. It captures the exhilarating highs and crushing lows that define a career in the performing arts.

Furthermore, the play explores the role of critics and the influence they wield over an artist's success. In *It's Only a Play*, the mere anticipation of a review causes hysteria, showcasing the disproportionate power critics have over the fate of a production. McNally uses this element of the story to question whether reviews should hold such authority in determining a show's worth. Are critics the ultimate judges of art, or should success be measured by the passion and dedication of the artists themselves? This question lingers throughout the play, challenging audiences to reflect on the nature of artistic validation and the pressures that come with public scrutiny.

In addition to critiquing the theater industry, *It's Only a Play* also acts as a love letter to Broadway. McNally's script brims with references to real-life productions, iconic performers, and industry gossip, making it an enjoyable experience for those in the know. The inside jokes and witty dialogue give audiences a sense of being part of the theatrical world, reinforcing the idea that, despite its flaws, Broadway remains a place of magic and wonder. The play revels in the sheer joy of storytelling and performance, reminding audiences why theater continues to captivate and inspire generation after generation.

Ultimately, *It's Only a Play* succeeds as a masterful satire because it does not simply mock the industry, but examines it with humor, honesty, and a deep appreciation for the art form. By exposing the absurdities of show business while simultaneously celebrating its vitality, McNally crafts a theatrical experience that resonates with audiences of all backgrounds. Whether one is an industry insider or a casual theatergoer, the themes of ambition, failure, and artistic passion remain universally relatable. Through its clever satire and heartfelt observations, the play captures the essence of what it means to be an artist, making audiences laugh even as they recognize the bittersweet truths hidden within the comedy.



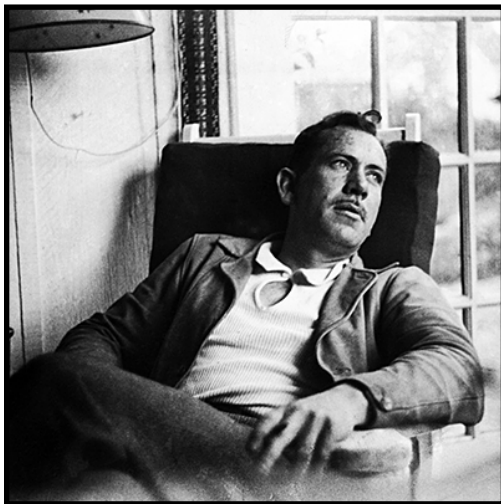
Publicity Photo for College of DuPage's College Theater's Spring 2025 Production of *It's Only a Play*
Costume Design by Kim Morris
Pictured (from Left to Right): Ashley Chavez as Virginia Noyes, Blake Piwowar as James Wicker, and Sophia Marino as Gus P. Head

Lights Up! Chart *It's Only a Play's* 36-Year Journey to the Great White Way

BY HELAINA HOVITZ

Source: Hovitz, Helaina. "Lights up! Chart *It's Only a Play's* 36-Year Journey to the Great White Way." *Broadway.Com*, Broadway.com, 17 Apr. 2017, www.broadway.com/buzz/177794/lights-up-chart-its-only-a-plays-36-year-journey-to-the-great-white-way/.

Places, everyone! Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick are reuniting on Broadway in *It's Only a Play*, an ultra-meta comedy about what happens after the curtain goes down on opening night. In this revamped revival of Terrence McNally's 1978 play, Lane and Broderick play two best friends: Peter Austin (Broderick), a playwright with a brand new Broadway show, and James Wicker (Lane), his actor pal who fears it's a flop. The ensemble show also features Rupert Grint, Megan Mullally, Stockard Channing, F. Murray Abraham and Micah Stock—with this many stars packed into one theater, anything could happen! Dim the lights, get ready for curtain, and remember, "Whatever happens tonight, it's only a play."



McNally ignored Steinbeck's advice

Before Terrence McNally was a celebrated playwright, he was a struggling stage manager for playwright Molly Kazan's workshops. When she asked McNally if he might be interested in being a tutor for the children of one of her writer friends, he jumped at the opportunity. The writer? John Steinbeck. According to *The Los Angeles Times*, the legendary novelist had some important words of advice for the young playwright: "Don't write for the theater."

His first play was a flop

Steinbeck be damned, McNally wrote his first play, *And Things That Go Bump in the Night*, at 25. The reviews for the 1965 Broadway comedy, about a man who brings his cross-dressing boyfriend home for dinner, were terrible. The playwright recounted one particularly scathing review to *The New York Times*: "The American theater would be a better place this morning if Terrence McNally's parents had smothered him in his cradle."



The setback inspired him

After attending the opening night party for the short-lived Broadway play *Legend*, starring F. Murray Abraham and Elizabeth Ashley, McNally realized his wasn't the only one getting panned. "I saw their pain as the reviews came in, which were pretty brutal, very much as they'd been for my first play," McNally told Broadway.com. "I saw the pain and the comedy in it." His experience (and the earlier cradle-smothering review) sparked the idea for *Broadway, Broadway*, a sendup of reviewers, producers, playwrights, and everyone involved in the wacky world of the Great White Way.

Broadway...or not

Broadway, Broadway, an insider's look at the world of theater, was poised to be a hit. It featured Geraldine Page and James Coco, and after its out-of-town tryout in Philadelphia in 1978, the comedy was bound for Broadway's Eugene O'Neill Theatre. But sadly, the play never made it out of the City of Brotherly Love. "I felt like I'd done something wrong," McNally later told The New York Times. "I lost confidence. I sulked a lot...But I came to understand there are worse things than having a play close in Philadelphia."



Time heals all wounds

In 1982, four years after its epic fail, McNally resurrected *Broadway, Broadway* at off-Broadway's Manhattan Punch Line Theatre with a revised script and a brand new title: *It's Only a Play*. With a cast featuring British screen actress Frances Cuka, Paul Guilfoyle (TV's *CSI*) and Ken Kliban (*Legal Eagles*), the comedy fared better. "You're laughing and trying to remember some of the funny one-liners to quote later," the Associated Press remarked.

Another round!

After the well-received but sparsely attended production of *It's Only a Play*, McNally added even more punchy quips, name-checking theater folks Lanford Wilson, Rita Moreno and "Betty" Bacall. The revamped production ran off-Broadway at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1985, with James Coco reprising his role, joining Christine Baranski and Paul Benedict...and it was a hit! "Only a writer who loves the theater and has survived its bloodiest wars could have written a comedy like this one," Frank Rich of The New York Times noted.





Next stop, L.A.

After another round of updated jokes featuring Joan Rivers and Macaulay Culkin, McNally’s peek behind the Broadway curtain headed west in 1992. The star-studded cast included David Hyde Pierce, Dana Ivey, Paul Benedict and Doris Roberts (playing the later-cut role of cab driver Emma Bovary) and Charles Nelson Reilly, who was also the punch line for several jokes in the script.

Play got a 2014 facelift

As *It’s Only a Play* entered the 21st century, McNally continued to update the topical punch lines. Out were Joan Rivers and Shirley McLaine to make way for gags about Kelly Ripa and Rosie O’Donnell. The playwright packed the play with sendups of current Broadway shows, including *The Lion King*, *Rock of Ages* and a musical tribute to *Wicked*. Shia LaBeouf, James Franco and Jeremy Piven are even name-checked and joked about in the revamped version.



Broadway (finally!) beckoned

36 years after closing in Philadelphia, *It’s Only a Play* has officially arrived on Broadway with a megawatt cast – including F. Murray Abraham from *Legend*, the play whose opening night initially inspired the comedy to begin with! “If you’ve never been to an opening night party of a Broadway show, then you haven’t lived,” Abraham joked to Broadway.com. What makes watching a show about theater people so much fun? “No matter what, we go on,” Nathan Lane explained. “You can kick us ‘til we’re bleeding but we get up and say, what’s next?”

Friends and Foes: Rivalry in *It's Only a Play*

At its heart, *It's Only a Play* is not just a satire of the theater world but also an exploration of the friendships and rivalries that define it. The relationships between the characters are filled with both warmth and tension, reflecting the competitive nature of the industry. McNally presents these dynamics through the central friendship between the playwright Peter Austin and his old friend James Wicker, an actor who chose television success over appearing in Peter's play. Their interactions reveal a mix of support, jealousy, and unresolved tension, making their bond both compelling and relatable. This relationship serves as a microcosm of the struggles that many artists face when personal relationships and professional ambitions become intertwined. The back-and-forth between them is laced with both genuine fondness and lingering resentment, as Peter grapples with feelings of betrayal while James tries to justify his choices.

The play also delves into the delicate balance between camaraderie and competition among artists. The characters cheer each other on, yet secretly crave individual triumphs. This dynamic is especially evident in Virginia Noyes, the aging diva whose desperate need for a comeback is both tragic and humorous. As her career hangs by a thread, her interactions with other characters highlight how fleeting success can be and how quickly fortunes can change in the world of entertainment. The constant tension between past glories and future uncertainties gives the play an emotional depth that resonates beyond the humor.

McNally suggests that, while friendships in the theater world are deeply meaningful, they are also complicated by the inevitable rivalries that arise when success is at stake. Professional envy and personal admiration often coexist, leading to complex relationships that oscillate between genuine affection and subtle competition. Many professional fields involve this same push and pull between collaboration and ambition. Actors, directors, writers, and producers all navigate similar struggles in their careers, making the play's themes universal.

As the night unfolds in *It's Only a Play*, these relationships become increasingly strained and tested by the uncertain fate of Peter's production. The characters must come to terms with their own insecurities and ambitions, revealing the fragile nature of artistic relationships. In doing so, McNally masterfully portrays the emotional stakes of the creative world, where personal and professional lines often blur. The juxtaposition of deep bonds and career-driven rivalries adds to the play's layered humor and insight, making it resonate with audiences who have experienced similar tensions in their own fields.

Ultimately, *It's Only a Play* portrays theater as a world where personal and professional relationships are deeply intertwined, making triumphs sweeter and failures even more painful. The play serves as a testament to the resilience of artists who must navigate a career path filled with both deep connections and intense rivalries, and it underscores the universal truth that, in any high-stakes profession, friendships must withstand the pressures of ambition and the ever-changing tides of success. The ability to support and challenge one another is what allows artists to grow, even as they compete for the same spotlight.

By the play's conclusion, the audience is left with a deeper appreciation for the intricate dance of friendship and rivalry within the theater industry. McNally's work highlights the importance of perseverance, honesty, and mutual respect in the face of both personal and professional challenges. Through his nuanced characters and witty dialogue, he captures the essence of artistic ambition, proving that the relationships forged in the creative world, while complicated, remain one of its most rewarding aspects. *It's Only a Play* ultimately reminds us that, despite rivalries and setbacks, the love of the craft and the bonds formed in its pursuit are what truly endure.

Theater as a Reflection of Society

Beyond its humor and character-driven drama, *It's Only a Play* serves as a commentary on the broader cultural significance of theater. McNally presents the theater as a microcosm of society, where dreams, egos, and insecurities collide under the pressure of public scrutiny. The play's depiction of opening night frenzy mirrors society's obsession with success and failure, fame and anonymity, and the ways in which art is both celebrated and harshly judged. It showcases how public opinion, often influenced by a handful of critics and industry gatekeepers, can shape the trajectory of an artist's career in an instant.

McNally also highlights the ephemeral nature of theatrical success and what is celebrated today may be forgotten tomorrow. This reflects a larger societal trend in entertainment and media, where attention is fleeting, and public opinion shifts rapidly. The idea of legacy versus momentary acclaim runs throughout the play, emphasizing the struggle artists face in maintaining relevance. McNally uses this idea to question the value of criticism and whether a single review should have the power to make or break a career. In doing so, the play asks audiences to consider who gets to decide what is deemed great art and how much power is given to external validation.

At the same time, the play underscores the resilience of artists who continue to create despite these challenges, emphasizing the enduring importance of theater as a cultural institution. Theater, much like society, is constantly evolving, adapting to new voices, perspectives, and trends. McNally's play reminds audiences that while theater can be an unforgiving industry, it is also one of the most vibrant and necessary artistic mediums. By holding a mirror up to the world of Broadway, *It's Only a Play* encourages audiences to consider how society values artistic contributions and the personal sacrifices made in pursuit of creative expression. The play forces us to ask difficult questions about the cost of success and the necessity of perseverance in a field that often overlooks its most dedicated contributors.

The play ultimately asks: Why do artists keep creating despite the odds? And the answer lies in the love of the craft, the thrill of performance, and the hope that each new work will leave a lasting impact. It is this passion that drives artists to push forward, to embrace the risks of opening night, and to believe in the transformative power of storytelling. In this way, *It's Only a Play* transcends its satirical roots to become a heartfelt tribute to the perseverance and dedication of all who dare to create, ensuring that theater remains a vital force in culture and society.



Publicity Photo for College of DuPage's College Theater's Spring 2025 Production of *It's Only a Play*
Costume Design by Kim Morris
Pictured (from Left to Right): Ashley Chavez as Virginia Noyes, Blake Piwowar as James Wicker, and Sophia Marino as Gus P. Head

Raves, Pans, and Panic: The High Stakes of Criticism

One of the central tensions in *It's Only a Play* is the power of theater criticism and the immense pressure that artists feel in response to it. Terrence McNally's play masterfully captures the anxiety, excitement, and sheer terror that comes with awaiting reviews, demonstrating how the fate of an entire production, and the careers of those involved, can hinge on the opinions of a handful of critics. In the high-stakes world of Broadway, a single well-placed rave can turn a struggling show into a sold-out sensation, while a scathing pan can send months (or even years) of hard work crashing down in an instant.

Through its sharp satire and heightened character reactions, *It's Only a Play* highlights both the absurdity and the reality of this pressure. McNally populates the play with characters who are each, in their own way, deeply affected by critical reception. The playwright, Peter Austin, is plagued by nervous anticipation, his entire future riding on what the reviews will say. His best friend, James Wicker, a television star who opted out of appearing in Peter's play, waits for the verdict with detached amusement, but even he is aware of how much is at stake. The aging star, Virginia Noyes, hopes for a career-reviving performance, while the producer, Julia Budder, desperately wants her investment to pay off. Even the critic, Ira Drew, represents the power of the press, knowing full well that his words can either elevate or dismantle a production. Each of these characters embodies different relationships to criticism, yet all are undeniably at its mercy.

McNally uses this dynamic to explore the nature of theatrical criticism itself. The play asks a crucial question: What gives a critic so much power? While good criticism provides valuable insight, context, and appreciation for the art form, it can also be subjective, unfair, or even vindictive. Many artists have struggled with the feeling that their work is being judged not on its own merit, but through the lens of personal biases or industry politics.

The play also examines the broader implications of how theater is consumed and evaluated. In a world where commercial success is often determined by early reviews, the theater industry has become increasingly dependent on critical reception as a marketing tool. If the *New York Times* deems a show a "must-see," ticket sales soar. If the review is negative, even the most dedicated audiences may think twice before attending. This phenomenon is not unique to theater, but the ephemeral nature of live performance makes the stakes even higher. A film can gain a cult following over time, but a Broadway show that fails to sell tickets due to bad reviews might close within weeks, before audiences even have a chance to discover it.

McNally does not suggest that all critics are villains or that all artists are victims. Instead, *It's Only a Play* highlights the symbiotic yet contentious relationship between creators and critics. The best critics advocate for great work and hold artists to high standards, but the most cutting reviews can also discourage creativity and risk-taking. The play reminds us that art is deeply personal, and while constructive criticism can be beneficial, there is a fine line between evaluation and destruction.

Ultimately, *It's Only a Play* offers a humorous yet poignant reflection on the fragile nature of artistic success. It reminds audiences that behind every production are countless hours of labor, passion, and dedication and that the fear of judgment is often outweighed by the sheer love of the craft. While criticism will always be a part of the theatrical experience, McNally's play encourages us to question how much power we give to a review and to remember that, in the end, the true value of theater lies in the act of creation itself. Whether met with raves or pans, the artists at the heart of the play remind us why they continue to take the stage, night after night: because, as terrifying as it may be, the show must go on.

Other Reviews

It's Only a Play at Schoenfeld Theatre

BY CHRIS JONES

Source: Jones, Chris. "Review: 'it's Only a Play' at Schoenfeld Theatre." *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago Tribune, 23 May 2019, www.chicagotribune.com/2014/10/09/review-its-only-a-play-at-schoenfeld-theatre/.

NEW YORK – “Without the theater, New York is Newark,” declares one of the characters in “It’s Only a Play.” Part sentimental confessional, part caustic farce rooted in bitterness and wholly insider theatrical baseball, this intermittently amusing, celebrity-juiced Terrence McNally comedy from 1982 has been updated, often painfully, for an age of gossip, annoying media personalities and an all-powerful critic likely to eat your precious creative baby as his late-night sushi on the train home.

Was it ever not thus?

Sure, this farce is now name-checking everyone from Ryan Seacrest to Ellen DeGeneres to playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney (crickets for that last one on a recent night at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre on Broadway).

And, layering on the metadrama, the people doing the name-checking — we’re talking the likes of Nathan Lane, Matthew Broderick, F. Murray Abraham, Rupert Grint, Megan Mullally and Stockard Channing — are actually celebrities themselves. At the uber-meta pinnacle of the night, the fictional character of actor James Wicker, played by Lane, suggests that while he does not appreciate comparisons with Harvey Fierstein, he’s fine with comparisons to Nathan Lane.

McNally, apparently, is far from fine with the current chief theater critic of The New York Times, Ben Brantley, who is not so much name-checked as forced to provide an ersatz rhythmic accompaniment to the action: “Ben Brantley, Ben, Brantley, Ben Brantley,” trundles the railroad car, as the assembled theatrical types sweat it out in their producer’s gilded Upper East Side cage, waiting for the great man to file his review and thus declare their destiny.

This is weird, not the least because Brantley is real and the characters he is reviewing, and the other critics mentioned, are all fictional or composites. It was weirder yet on the night of this review, since Brantley was present, resulting in half the orchestra section nearly snapping its collective neck off as it whisked its attention from the stage to the beleaguered man on the aisle.

If you’re in the same inhuman critic’s racket, you have real sympathy for Brantley. Few journalists like to be so central to any story. Moreover, while the importance of a New York Times review for a Broadway play is paramount, there is something about the obsession that flows from this play that makes you despair for the future of American theater. Really, you think, you guys can’t talk about something else?

Fine, so this is a comedy. As directed by Jack O'Brien, it is also a depressingly uneven production. The first scene, which takes place between the immaculate Lane, who is superb, and the one no-name in the cast, Micah Stock — having a career-making moment playing a newbie to Broadway and thus the guy serving the drinks — sparkles with pleasures. You think you're in for a great night. Channing, playing a washed-up Hollywood actress, is similarly entertaining. Mullally, playing the standard-issue rich producer, gets off some corks. We all are having fun.

But then Grint (known for Ron in the "Harry Potter" movies) enters, playing a crazed British theater director too far gone to exist in real space or time (even by the lowly standards of the type). And then the otherworldly Broderick shows up as the earnest playwright and, well, the air goes out of the whole affair because Grint is about six sizes too large and Broderick's performance is, with a few funny exceptions, just too creepy to be funny. And a running gag referencing just about every show playing on Broadway wears out its welcome. At one point Stock's Gus arrives carrying African-themed coats. He tells us the cast of "The Lion King" has arrived at the party. They go around wearing their costumes? A joke, I know, but farce, folks, has to have consistent rules.

Lane, mercifully, sticks around, as does Stock. There are laughs throughout. "What do any of us old gypsies know," Lane's Wicker says. "I liked 'The Addams Family.'"

That's a gag that only works if you know that Lane was both in "The Addams Family" and unhappy with the experience, but then that's the pervasive tone of the night, as everyone works out their issues with the business that has them by the throat, love it as they do. As the fictional Brantley says at the end of his fictional lousy review, onward and upward with the arts.



Broadway Review: *It's Only a Play*

BY MARILYN STASIO

Source: Stasio, Marilyn. "Broadway Review: 'It's Only a Play.'" *Variety*, Variety, 10 Oct. 2014, variety.com/2014/legit/reviews/broadway-review-its-only-a-play-lane-broderick-grint-mullally-1201325157/.

Nobody does mean-nasty-vicious like Terrence McNally, bless his black heart. The pitiless playwright has exhumed "It's Only a Play," his 1986 love-hate letter to those big babies who work and play on Broadway, and updated it for today — and for the timely if schmaltzy reunion of Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick. The comedy's slight plot, about the high drama (and low comedy) of the opening night of a new Broadway show, is still a trifle. But the well-aimed and highly personal zingers are more malicious, and delicious, this time out.

The setup for this showbiz comedy is perfect: The producer, playwright, director and star of a new Broadway show, along with friends and foes, are huddled upstairs in the producer's townhouse, anxiously awaiting the reviews, while a raucous opening-night party rages downstairs.

After an initial false step in 1978 (when the show, then called "Broadway, Broadway," flopped out of town), the concept clicked in 1982, when the show was retooled and re-launched Off Off Broadway by the Manhattan Punch Line. It worked just as well in 1986, when Manhattan Theater Club picked up the production for its City Center main stage. And since the more things change in this business, the more they stay the same, McNally's original blueprint still works just fine in helmer Jack O'Brien's snappy production.

O'Brien lets us know right at the top of the show that we're in for some good times. One big tip is his savvy casting of Micah Stock as Gus P. Head, the clueless innocent who has been hired to collect the guests' coats, but hopes that one of the famous among them will recognize his hidden theatrical talents. Stock is a natural comic actor, with his lanky frame and hilarious deadpan expression, and he makes an exciting Main Stem debut as this dim yokel. "This town's gonna eat him alive," someone predicts.

Gus is on coat duty in the producer's bedroom and is seriously starstruck by all the theater royalty at the party. He identifies them all when he tosses their coats (witty concoctions by costumer Ann Roth) onto the king-sized bed: Tommy Tune's impossibly long fur number is the first sight gag to get a solid laugh. One by one, all the Broadway shows, from "The Lion King" to "Rock of Ages," are represented — and impaled with one of the scribe's brilliant one-liners.

While they're all partying downstairs, the principals are jumping out of their skins from stress. Anyone who's been there will tell you that you really have to be there — and have a horse in the race — to get the full wallop of the nerve-wracking experience of waiting for the critical word on your show, in this case called "The Golden Egg." McNally captures that near-death experience with a barrage of the anxiety-ridden jokes Broadway wags crack to keep the dark away.

The stakes are certainly high for the playwright, Peter Austin (Matthew Broderick), whose professional career and livelihood are on the line. Peter is one of those eternally stagestruck naïfs who can't quite believe their luck to work in the most wonderful profession in the world. Broderick plays to that childlike sense of wonder, as well as to the unspoken but underlying terror that his good luck is about to be snatched away from him.

The most conflicted person in the room is the scribe's once-best friend and collaborator, James Wicker (Nathan Lane, Broadway's reigning prince of comedy), a TV sitcom star who turned down the male lead in Peter's play and now wonders if he's going to regret that decision. For the sake of their old friendship, James would kinda-sorta like the play to be a hit. But far better it should be a flop, so he wouldn't have to kick himself for turning it down — especially if ABC cancels his show. Or if, God forbid, the actor in the role he turned down (who has "all of my mannerisms and none of my warmth") should be up for a Tony. Lane has the best comic timing in the business, and it really is a joy to watch him as he savors every drop of McNally's venomous humor.

Devoted fans of this "Odd Couple," who wish that every season produced a new show like "The Producers," made this "Play" a hit before it officially opened. And for these fans, there's a rewarding hug-and-make-up scene between Peter and James that might even be as heartfelt as it plays.

Everybody else in this posh anteroom of hell — amiably mocked by set designer Scott Pask as the over-decorated lair of a rich lady with a doting husband and a lot of time on her hands — also has a vested interest in the fate of "The Golden Egg." There's the producer, to begin with. Megan Mullally spoons some sugar into her satirical perf of Julia Budder, who's sunk a fortune into the show so she can be its sole producer, a "real" producer who "gives notes" and stands alone on stage to pick up her Tony Award.

Stockard Channing comes out with guns blazing as Virginia Noyes, the has-been star, pharmaceutical expert and notorious insurance liability who has to perform in a court-directed ankle monitor and check in every couple of hours with her parole officer. Virginia is so wicked, she comes right out with the "c" word — or, as that dear nitwit, Julia, puts it: "the 'k' word." Channing appears to be in heaven in this bad-girl role.

Rupert Grint overdoes it as Frank Finger, the eccentric British director who is so unsettled by all the mindless praise for his inane work that he's actually hoping for bad notices. But this young thesp has grown up since his Harry Potter days, and he certainly looks eccentric in his cheeky Carnaby Street costume.

The last guy in the room, who clearly has no reason to be at this party, is the theater critic Ira Drew (F. Murray Abraham, brave soul, to play a man known as "the Eviscerator"). He's not much as a character, but he makes an excellent garbage pail for all those clichés about critics, like the notion that they all want to be playwrights. The buffoonish Ira actually gets off easy, compared with the treatment of the New York Times critic whose devastating notice scrambles this "Egg" when it's read out loud at the party.

But McNally reaches far and wide for his victims, from Catherine Zeta-Jones to the cast of "Mathilda" and "those dreadful dancing Irish." There's even a special dig for those vile message boards in which so-called theater "lovers" savage shows while they're still in preview.

At the heart of the humor is the sublime narcissism of the professional players and their honest conviction that nothing matters except the theater. Certainly not those real-life horrors reported on the television news shows that James impatiently cuts off while waiting for Roma Torres' all-important TV review from NY1. So laugh if you must — and you really must laugh at McNally's unquenchable wit — but those sloppy-kiss tributes to the theater delivered by Peter and James are deeply felt and honestly moving. And if you don't share the gooey sentiments, you really shouldn't be at this show.

Analysis Tools

Things to Think About Prior to Performance

- What are your expectations for a comedy about the theater world? How do you think McNally will balance humor with commentary on the industry?
- The play centers around a Broadway play's opening night. How do you think McNally will portray the pressures and egos of the theater world?
- How do you define "success" in theater? Is it strictly about a critical acclaim, or do you think there are other elements (such as artistic integrity, collaboration, etc.)?
- How might the theatricality of the play itself mirror the self-absorption of the characters? What do you think the play has to say about the role of performance in everyday life?
- What do you think about the concept of vanity and self-importance as seen through the lens of theater professionals? How might this theme appear in the play?
- Do you expect the play to explore themes of friendship, loyalty, or betrayal? How do you think these themes will evolve throughout the story?
- What emotions do you expect to experience during the performance?
- How do you think McNally uses humor to comment on the often absurd nature of show business?

Things to Watch For in Performance

- Was the casting effective in portraying the types of theater professionals described in the play? Did the actors bring the characters to life in a way that felt true to their exaggerated nature?
- How does the set design reflect the world of the theater, and how does it contribute to the one of the play? Are there any key details in the set that underscore the characters' personalities or the chaos of the opening night?
- Were there levels on the stage for variety? If so, did they heighten the story?
- How does the color scheme and costume design heighten the show?
- There are a ton of props used in this play. Do these props help further the plot or character development? How?
- How does sound design and music contribute to the comedic pacing and overall atmosphere? Does it help elevate moments of tension or farce?
- In a play that plays with both comedy and drama, how does McNally use timing and rhythm to shift between these tones?

Things to Think About After the Performance

- What is the central message or core value of *It's Only a Play*? What does McNally seem to be saying about the theater world, or about art in general?
- Why do you think McNally chose to write about the opening night of a Broadway play? What does this setting add to the humor and deeper themes?
- How did the production's staging and set design influence your understanding of the play? Did the design choices enhance or distract from the humor?
- How did humor function in the story? Was it purely for laughs, or did it also offer deeper insight into the characters and the world they inhabit?
- What role did the themes of fame, success, and failure play in the drama? How did the characters deal with their own personal and professional insecurities?
- How do the relationships between the characters evolve, and what does that reveal about the nature of friendship and loyalty in the theater world?
- How effective was the pacing of the play? Were there moments where the humor slowed down the action, or did it keep you engaged throughout?
- How does the play explore the concept of "truth" in the theater world? How do the characters navigate the line between performance and reality?
- Did the play challenge your ideas about the value of art and the sacrifices people make in the pursuit of success? How so?
- Did the ending provide a satisfying resolution? Why or why not? How did the conclusion tie into the themes of the play?

Other Analysis Tools

- What happens in the very last moments of the play? What is said, and how does that wrap up the characters' arcs and thematic elements?
- Consider the title, *It's Only a Play*. How does it encapsulate the essence of the characters, the setting, and the theme of the play? Why do you think McNally chose this title to reflect the world of the play?

Additional Information

The running time for this production is approximately 2 hours, which includes one 15 minute intermission.

Please join us for a pre-show discussion Thursday, March 6 at 6:45pm in MAC 140 preceding the preview performance. Note that the pre-show discussions will include the director and designers and will be a discussion on the approach to this production.

There will also be a post-show discussion following the Friday, March 14 performance. The post-show will be with the director, cast, and crew, and we will be fielding questions from the audience.

Please join us!