

## THEATER AND REVIEWS



Drama: Chris DeOni (Diego Rivera, left), Dan Kremer (Edsel Ford) and Kirsten Giroux (Eleanor Ford) are featured in "A Gift of Glory."

## Meadow Brook finds its role with 'Glory'

BY FRANK PROVENZANO  
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*"Gift of Glory: Edsel Ford and the Diego Rivera Murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts,"* written by Karim Alrawi and directed by Debra L. Wicks. Through Sunday, April 4. Performances 8 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, except 6 p.m. Saturday, March 27; 2 p.m. Wednesday, Saturday & Sunday; and 6:30 p.m. Sunday. Meadow Brook Theatre, Wilson Hall, on the campus of Oakland University, Rochester Hills. Tickets: \$19.50-\$35, (248) 377-3300.

Few plays accomplish something before the curtain rises. But Karim Alrawi's *"Gift of Glory: Edsel Ford and the Diego*

*Murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts"* is that rare original work whereby the promise of regional theater pays off.

Before the play opened at Meadow Brook on Saturday, Alrawi's story about the struggle behind the famous murals had already raised the quality of discussion about the integral role for regional theater as a place where local stories are dramatized.

That's hardly a small feat. *"Gift of Glory"* is set in Detroit during the economic depression of the 1930s, a time of unprecedented discrepancies of wealth. Another striking discrepancy is the emotional differences between Henry Ford and his only son, Edsel, who at the time, was president of Ford Motor Co.

When the elder Ford approves the action taken by his personal henchman, Harry Bennett, to shoot protesters at the gates of the Rouge Factory, the differences between father and son become irreconcilable.

Around the same time, DIA Director William Valentiner has asked Rivera to paint a mural at the museum. The Mexican-born Rivera is an avowed Marxist who is intrigued by the machinery of the Ford plants and the struggles of laborers.

Alrawi speculates that it was

the Rouge incident where five workers were killed that served as the catalyst for Edsel Ford's financial and emotional support for the murals.

In essence, Rivera's mural is

more of a mirror that reveals the

soul of the working man. And it's no less of a capitalist than Edsel Ford who appears as Steinbeck's Tom Joad in a three-role suit.

While the opening-night performance, at times, lacked the polish of a seamless drama, the play presented many layers for audiences to ponder.

To his credit, Alrawi doesn't flinch in rubbing away at the bigotry and ideological zealotry of the like of Henry Ford, Harry Bennett and Father Coughlin, who were all opposed to the mural for their own reasons.

Ultimately, *"Gift of Glory"* isn't about a "painting," but the universal struggle between ruthless materialism and benevolent humanitarianism.

Ironically, this type of serious discourse has been strikingly absent at Meadow Brook, even though the theater is located on a university campus where academic freedom supposedly thrives. Alrawi's vigor and intellectual breadth is both challenging and refreshing.

In general, Alrawi's message is delivered with warmth, humor and at times, the tone of a history lesson. Sometimes explanations of historical details seem a bit starchy, yet at other times, the playwright masterfully blends information into a breezy dialogue.

New Yorker Chris De Oni as

Rivera constructs a larger-than-life character whose lust for

painting and fairness for the common man provides the play

with a sense of urgency. Alrawi

has created an utterly unlike-

able antagonist in Bennett, played with an icy cruelty by Hollis Huston.

But ultimately, the play's success depends on whether Diah

Kramer's portrayal of Edsel Ford, too often Edsel doesn't show the kind of backbone to justify being the center of the drama.

Despite several wrinkles, *"Gift of Glory"* will encourage audiences to think more deeply about the manufacturing culture that many of us have mistakes for a more meaningful culture about aesthetics, ethics and social purpose. The culture in Detroit, as Alrawi boldly points out, is intricately bound to the art of making automobiles.

Beyond Alrawi's drama of the mural lies the struggle within Detroit's first family, the power of art to represent the truth, and the polemics of the greatest social upheaval in U.S. history. A discussion that seems extraordinary compared to today's pub-

lic.

That Alrawi was able to incorporate so many subplots into his story is both the play's strength and weakness. But on balance, *"Gift of Glory"* is one of the most compelling pieces of "regional theater" in recent years.

Perhaps Meadow Brook will begin to explore other stories that lie in the heart of the collective soul called Detroit.

## Bullock, Affleck hold their own in amusing 'Forces of Nature'

BY JON KATZ  
SPECIAL WRITER

Let's all agree on one thing: Sandra Bullock looks a lot better in her underwear than the late John Candy did in his. Any other advantages of *"Forces of Nature"* over "Planes, Trains and Automobiles" are also in the eye of the beholder.

*"Nature"* takes the "I've got to be somewhere soon, but this kook I've been thrown together with is making it awfully hard" concept and gives us two beautiful people (Bullock and Ben Affleck) doing the work of two comedians (Candy and Steve Martin). Do they hold their own? Interestingly, yes.

Ben Affleck plays Ben, an upright groom-to-be headed from New York to Savannah, where the bride (Maura Tierney of "L.A. Doctors") and her parents are busy putting up tents and mixing mint juleps. In the background, we hear broadcast reports of a hurricane apparently bearing right down on their backyard.

While sitting in the plane writing his vows on a laptop, who should plunk down beside him but wild child Sarah (Bullock), a woman of such energy that one wonders why she needs a plane at all.

When the jet skids off the runway, Ben inadvertently saves Sarah's life, setting them on a course into troubled water. He couldn't wait for the next plane, so off they go to a rented villa with a guy named Vic. When that ends with a police bust in Virginia, they board the train.

When that ends with the train going the other way, she finagles them onto a Miami-bound bus of condo-hopping seniors. And with each succeeding disaster we learn more about what's waiting for the eccentric Sarah in Savannah, while Ben considers what's waiting for him there as well.

Along the way, they are beset

by hail, fire, rain, lightning and the aforementioned hurricane, much of it computer-generated by the team that gave us "Twister." But the thing that takes the most beating in this film is the institute of marriage. Ben may end up soaking wet, but he is continually deluged by storm warnings from the matrimony burned around him.

From his own grandfather to fellow passengers, we are led to believe that there isn't a single happily married person on the East Coast. It also doesn't help Ben's wedding bell blues when songs like "The Tender Trap" and "Love the One You're With" are playing nearby. Most of all, Sarah is quite an irresistible force herself.

To quote that famous forecast: or Bob Dylan, "you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows," and in a mar-

velous moment that mixes real time and slow-motion, Ben is

burned in his life's direction at last.

Bullock is a whirlwind. Equally at home in thrillers ("Speed," "The Net") and romantic comedies ("Practical Magic," "While You Were Sleeping"), she's unafraid to look like she just came in from the rain, and that attribute will keep the welcome mat out for some time to come. Affleck was cast in "Nature" before "Good Will Hunting" was released; talk about forecasting. Broad comedy may never be his thing, but he's just fine doing the straight conservative guy who's pulled into the maelstrom.

Together, they're an appealing pair who we'd enjoy seeing in further adventures. Let's see, maybe he's an astronomer and she's a dancer and there's this meteor coming...

## Stagecrafters 'Light Up the Sky'

Stagecrafters is presenting the comedy "Light Up the Sky" by Moss Hart through Sunday, March 28 at the historic Baldwin Theatre, 415 S. Lafayette in downtown Royal Oak.

Tickets are \$10-\$12, all seats reserved. Call (248) 541-6430. A special dinner/theater package is available from Illusions Bar & Grill in downtown Royal Oak by calling (248) 586-1313.

In "Light Up the Sky," an idealistic young author (Wayne Dossin) is surrounded by the emotional people who have had a hand in getting his first play produced. The action takes place in the self-affectionate star's (Rosemary Gass of Southfield) hotel room before and after the play's out-of-town opening.

Reeling through the hilarious scenes at a crazy pitch of ner-

vousness are the star, assertive stage mother (Maurie Cook of Beverly Hills), director (Marc Mego) whose reactions stem from his tear ducts, the irascible producer (Mark Hammell of Lathrup Village) and jewel collecting wife (Linda Hammell) and the real life wife of Mark Hammell.

The production is directed by Jay Kaplan of Lathrup Village.

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