



'Invulnerability' at Playhouse: It's super

Theater review

By Jackie Demaline · jdemaline@enquirer.com · April 9, 2010

More incredible than the Hulk, more amazing than Spiderman, that's "The History of Invulnerability," a consideration of The Man of Steel, his co-creator Jerry Siegel and Truth, Justice and the America Way. It is in its world premiere run at Playhouse in the Park.

"Invulnerability" is going to be the spring season's buzz show – it runs through May 2 in the Thompson Shelterhouse. Part of Playhouse's 50th anniversary celebration, it's also the best new play of the 2009-2010 Cincinnati theater season.

Playwright David Bar Katz' conceit is that the action takes place in the last few moments of Siegel's life. You know, the moment when it's said your whole life flashes before you.

Bar Katz doesn't believe that moment is necessarily only about what DID happen. It can be what should have happened, what could have been undone, what happens when the forces of good are powerless to fight evil.

"Invulnerability" is told in a series of connected scenes, some closely, some loosely, which gradually form into a cohesive and powerful whole, thanks to Michael Haney's astute direction, a vivid acting ensemble and a wrap-around-the-theater stage design that has a G-force pull on the audience. Haney knocks it out of the park again.

The play has three constants: Siegel (David Deblinger), Superman (Steve Wilson) and the world of comics. Period-style comic book panels wrap around the walls of the Shelterhouse, enveloping the audience, and as the story unfolds in live action on stage, it's

simultaneously shown comics style, with original comics panels by Joe Staton (zowie!) on several screens around the theater.

Deblinger does a fine job as our nebbishy tour guide through Siegel's story. This Siegel is a raconteur, bright and funny, sad and observant in Clark Kent glasses.

Was Superman born fully formed in the mind of a kid in Cleveland in 1938? Of course not – our histories inform us. So it is probably not coincidental that young Siegel's father was murdered, or that generations of his family had suffered oppression in the Ukraine before coming to America, strangers in a strange but free land.

Siegel was certainly not unaffected by current affairs, particularly the extermination of the Jews in Nazi camps. And so there are scenes at Auschwitz, where a pale, skinny boy (a terrific Richard Lowenburg) treasures a battered copy of a Superman comic book and escapes horror by waiting for him to come to the rescue.

As Superman fought criminal masterminds, Siegel and partner Joe Shuster had their own battle. This is where Justice and the American Way come in. Naïve kids late in the Great Depression, they signed away their rights to their character for a pittance and the courts upheld the ownership of a greedy, amoral corporation. It's a cast of 12 – huge for the Shelterhouse, but

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this is a big life story with even bigger thoughts, not least of which is what happens to a superhero born in a kinder, gentler time in America? Superman may be ageless, but society has coarsened. Would Siegel have had his heart broken anyway? Is the suit the only thing that has stayed the same?

The 10 supporting cast members all play a variety of roles, playing it for real or in exaggerated comic book style as scenes require.

Joseph Parks, so wonderful in "Love Song," returns with a quietly compelling performance as a trio of sharply defined key characters: Shuster, a heroic prisoner at Auschwitz and Siegel's estranged son. Alexis Jacknow stands out as all the women in Siegel's life, real and fictional.

"The History of Invulnerability," through May 2. Thompson Shelterhouse, Playhouse in the Park, Eden Park. 513-421-3888 and www.cincyplay.com.

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