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Theater Review: Keeping It In the Family

By [Justin Sondak](#) in [Arts & Entertainment](#) on Sep 22, 2006 6:45PM

Theaters typically sell subscriptions on the strength of tried and true stories, and no story is more tried and true than the unhappy family. Writers write, and actors play, what they know or can easily research. Patrons take comfort, or catharsis, in seeing characters who have it worse. This week, three Chicago companies opened the the 2006 season with Tolstoy's overquoted observation about unhappy families in mind.

[Come Back, Little Sheba, Shattered Globe Theatre](#)

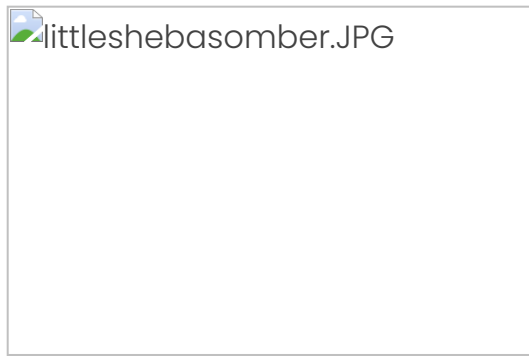
For the most part, William Inge's portrait of 1950s America is a Norman Rockwell painting. Here we have compelling nostalgia, if not exactly high art. The unhappily married Lola and Doc (Linda Reiter and John Judd) project their past disappointments on each another as their boarder, the fresh-faced Marie (Maggie Corbett), sorts out her love life. It's all something out of Freudian Drama 101, territory upon which Ibsen and Albee more ably tread. Inge does have an ear for the period though, taking his own sweet time getting to his predictable, but no less explosive climax.

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Shattered Globeâ€™s rendition is

well worth seeing thanks to Reiter and Juddâ€™s whirlwind energy, tearing up Kevin Haganâ€™s carefully recreated suburban interior. The depth of this production is found in a thousand little gestures: Doc glancing at Marie, Marieâ€™s subtly shifting body language around her boy toy Turk (Jayce Ryan) and steady beau Bruce (Ryan Martin), Lolaâ€™s reaction when the whiskey bottle goes missing. The work may be dated, but with this cast and production team transforming the intimate studio theater, Ingeâ€™s portrait of addictive behavior and domestic combat felt devastating.

King Lear, Goodman Theatre



Stacy Keachâ€™s bloodshot eye

dominates the ads, but this show really belongs to Director Robert Fallsâ€™ audacious vision, bringing the show into modern, fractured, war-torn Eastern Europe. Lear (Keach, here a star and a perfect team player) partitions his kingdom at a banquet hall party for his two syncophantic Hilton-esque daughters (the delightfully snotty Kim Martin-Cotton and Kate Arrington) when his youngest, the loyal but bluntly honest Cordelia (a sympathetic Laura Odeh) simply canâ€™t play along with the charade. Intra- and inter-family rivalries play out in front of a gated compound, in nouveau riche homes, and

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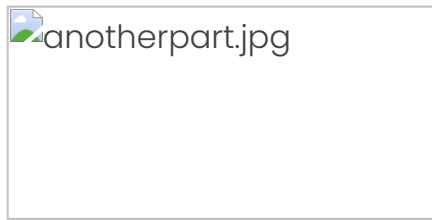
ultimately on a battlefield not far from hell. The suggestible Lear descends into madness, then enjoys a brief moment of redemption before everything falls apart.

The bleak aftermath and the stacks of bodybags dragged through the landscape echo the Balkans and Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the ongoing conflict in Iraq. That conclusion, along with the production's sexual politics, eye-gouging, and extended torture and assassination scenes, are not for the weak-stomached. Braver theatergoers are rewarded with an array of performances suggesting absolutely everything is at stake, and with a chest of production goodies: magnificent rainfall, a luxury car driven on stage, and a world so complete that the original British history is an afterthought. For a few moments, the production felt a bit over the top (Did we really need that much fog?) but the rest of the evening was entertaining, sometimes painstakingly so.

One more review after the jump...

Another Part of the House, Teatro Vista

Migdalia Cruz gets it. The veteran playwright's update of The House of Bernarda Alba, Federico Lorca's portrait of a family bound a little too tightly by tradition regularly produced by university drama programs and bilingual ensembles across the western world, fires a flare gun at the original work's restrained formality, bringing it into the 21st Century. This time around, grandmother Maria Josepha's love affair is animalistic, she simply can't help herself. The romantic attraction between sisters Magdalena and Amelia is more explicit. And Bernarda and her servant Poncia are allowed to step out of the ring for a few candid moments.



When Cruz's casually poetic rendition meets this ensemble's stirring delivery, the question of who deserves credit for the well-delivered production seems moot. Julia Neary infuses Bernarda with enough presence to keep her family together. Laura Crotte is a hoot as Maria Josefa, the horny octogenarian, and Rachel Cerda brings a heartbreaking idealism to the young Adela. The chamber drama works surprisingly well in the Chopin's main theater, although a few lines were swallowed by the strange acoustics. This production is in English with a few flourishes of Spanish needing no translation.

Come Back, Little Sheba is at the Victory Gardens Greenhouse, 2257 N Lincoln, Thursdays - Sundays through October 21. Tickets are \$27-35. More information at www.shatteredglobe.org.

King Lear is at the Goodman Theatre, 170 N. Dearborn, Tuesdays - Sundays through October 22. Tickets are \$20 - \$75. More information at www.goodmantheatre.org.

Another Part of the House is at the Chopin Theatre, 1543 W Division, Thursdays - Sundays through October 22. Tickets are \$22-30. More information at www.teatrovista.org.

Images via Janna Giacoppo, Shattered Globe Theatre; Luis DeLaTorre, Teatro Vista; Liz Lauren, Goodman Theatre.

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