

Bloody *Mojo* Reveals a Moral Core

Richard Wolfe goes to extreme measures to show the ridiculousness of violence

THEATRE

Mojo

by Jez Butterworth
Directed by Richard Wolfe
A Western Theatre Conspiracy Co-op production

• BY COLIN THOMAS

Mojo smacked me in the head, spat in my face, and left me laughing and liking it. On every level, *Mojo* is so superior to all the other shows I've seen this holiday season. I beg you not to let it get lost in the rush.

The script's hilarious and as dark as coagulating blood. Set in 1958 in a two-bit dance bar covered in sequins ("It's like Little Richard walked in here and just exploded," one character says), the play tells the story of a bunch of pill-popping punks who dream of making it to the big time on the coattails of their "property", a hot young rock 'n' roller named Silver Johnny. But so many people want a piece of Johnny that some of them end up in pieces themselves - literally sawed in half and stuffed in garbage cans.

Playwright Jez Butterworth wrote *Mojo*, his first full-length play, when he was 26, and won a fistful of awards for it, including Britain's Olivier Award for Best Comedy in 1996. Critics have been falling all over themselves to offer comparisons to Harold Pinter, David Mamet, and Quentin Tarantino. Two out of three of those comparisons make total sense.

Like Pinter, Butterworth makes music out of dialogue. He uses rhythm and repetition - machine-gun bursts punctuated by scary silences - to wring out all of the absurdity of everyday speech. Mamet makes beautiful music, too, and like Pinter and now Butterworth, he plays variations on the theme of hypermasculinity - gloriously powerful, pathetically self-destructive. In *Mojo*, Potts says that God has spoken to him in a dream: "He's going. 'Keep your mouth shut, unless your nose is in the trough, then open your mouth and chew like fuck. That's all there is, chum.'" My favourite



Baby (Camyar Chai) gets ready to inflict a bit of ultraviolence on rock star Silver Johnny (Peter Stebbings) in *Mojo*, one of the season's strongest plays.

insult: "I fuck your mother as she shouts your name."

Which brings up the issue of extremity. Much of the comedy in *Mojo* emerges from grotesquerie so extreme it becomes absurd, and that jolts-per-minute factor is a lot like Tarantino. Some of the most hilarious passages of dialogue are also the most gruesome. One of the guys shoots another in the head with a derringer. The crack of the bullet is followed by a horrifying silence, then the victim starts to whine as he gushes blood: "Fucking great. What if I die? Did you ever think of that? How much blood do you have to lose before you're dead?" One of his mates consoles him: "It is only a little hole."

But Butterworth isn't Tarantino: *Mojo* has a moral context. Perhaps that's partly because of the nature of theatre, in which there's no denying the preciousness and vulnerability

of human flesh. On the stage, the only way to match the realism of the atrocities in *Pulp Fiction* would be to commit them. That would be illegal, of course, and might lead to some problems in casting. It's oddly reassuring in this alienated celluloid culture that the nature of theatre continues to remind us of our humanity; Butterworth emphasizes the ridiculousness of violence even as he exploits it soulless glamour.

Richard Wolfe directs a very handsome production. Potts (Michael P. Northey) and Sweets (Alex Zahara) are a classic comic duo - one a relatively savvy little hood, the other thick as a brick - and these two actors provide some of the best moments in this mounting. Zahara's fantastic - a bundle of fidgety bug-eyed innocence, tremendous timing, and total emotional credibility, with the added bonus of a consistent accent. Northey's great, too,

whether working as a team with Zahara or on his own. In the second act, Potts gets caught in a dangerous lie. It's hilarious watching the character's discomfort and the actor's freshness and joy in rhythm as Potts tries to squirm his way to safety.

Although Potts and Sweets carry a lot of the first act, Baby, played here by Camyar Chai, takes over centre stage in the second. This production of *Mojo* could be scarier than it is, and that's partly because Chai doesn't find all of the threat in Baby, especially in the first act. He's not as funny as he could be, either. But I'm certainly not saying that he does a bad job. In fact, when the script takes a deeper psychological turn, Chai comes into his own. He's excellent at revealing Baby's shaky underpinnings.

Bob Frazer displays a truly deft comic touch with Skinny, another of the lads, but he struggles to keep his Cockney accent from wandering toward Yorkshire. Ari Solomon does fine work as Mickey, the would-be boss. He's suave and controlling. I thought that he, too, could have been a shade more menacing, but that's probably a function of casting; more age might have helped.

The show could use some fine-tuning in terms of the overall modulation of its rhythms - Act I plateaued on opening night - but that may work itself out over the run. Quibbles aside, director Wolfe is proving himself a real up-and-comer. He also codirected the smart and successful *The Pintauro Cafe* last year.

Go see *Mojo* if you're in the mood to have your limits pushed. ■