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written and performed by Matthew Crehan Higgins directed by Dava Jones March 31 - April 8

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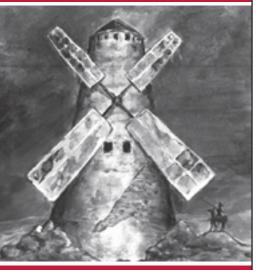
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RING OF FIRE

The Johnny Cash musical, Ring of Fire, which began life at Buffalo's Studio Arena Theatre, did not triumph on Broadway. Indeed, critics responded to its opening at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre this week with some of the most scathing reviews of the season. The Reuters headline, "Ring of Fire Cashes and Burns," about sums it up.

Though the show delighted Buffalo audiences and was undeniably not without charm, the New York critical reaction is not much of a surprise. Even in Buffalo, the show needed some serious work, which it was never to receive. Lulled into complacency by the effusive response of Studio Arena audiences, the producers cancelled a San Francisco engagement in favor of a direct run on Broadway.

I have been somewhat bemused by the inflated local euphoria over the project. Studio Arena does have the distinction of being the first theater to present the show, but their artistic contribution to Ring of Fire was minimal to non-existent. This is not the same as Broadway-bound shows that started with Des McAnuff at LaJolla Playhouse, or with Jack O'Brien at the Old Globe. Studio Arena does not even have an artistic director of record. Ring of Fire was, for all practical purposes, booked in.

Having said that, I would quickly add that the impulse to open the resources of Studio Arena Theatre to a project like Ring of Fire was a good one. There is no guarantee that any new show will be successful and Ring of Fire was very good to Studio Arena. It has been a long time since a director with the credentials of Richard Maltby, Jr. has worked at Studio Arena. As the creator of Ain't Misbehavin', he is arguably the inventor of what have come to be known as "Juke Box Musicals." His presence here enriched our theater scene, and the show generated more excitement at Studio Arena than we have seen for some time. Though it was a Broadway failure, Ring of Fire was a Studio Arena success.

A theater cannot be judged on the relative merits of individual productions alone. In that vein, I would reiterate that the impulse to offer audiences a chance to see Ibsen's Ghosts was a good one too, despite the disappointing production that resulted. Studio Arena has drifted far from the mission of theatrical excellence upon which it was founded, and Ghosts, at least, is undeniably one of the great plays. The possibility that Studio Arena offered a production run amok-over-designed and under-directed-was symptomatic of a



lack of artistic leadership at the institution which has been in evidence for some time

Of course such topics do beg the question, what in the world is going on down at Studio Arena Theatre? Word is that we are nearing a decision on the choice of an artistic director and that there are finalists. A lot rests on this choice and we can only keep our fingers crossed.

THE COCKTAIL HOUR

At long last, Buffalo can see A.R. Gurney's 1988 play, *The Cocktail Hour*. After *The* Dining Room, The Cocktail Hour is arguably Gurney's most celebrated play, and yet, because it is partially autobiographical, the playwright never allowed it to be performed here in his hometown. After the death of his mother, however, Gurney relented, and the Kavinoky Theatre successfully obtained the rights.

The original production—which originated at the Old Globe in San Diego, under the direction of Jack O'Brien-famously starred Buffalonian Nancy Marchand as an upperclass Buffalo matron whose son comes home, announcing that he has written a play-about the family.

Writing for the New York Times, Frank Rich said, "The laughter in Act I is almost continuous, and much of it is prompted by Ms. Marchand's irresistible suburban grande dame...Just to hear the actress order a refill of her martini-a frequent occurrence-is to get a lesson in comic timing and inflection."

Anne Gayley, resident Grande Dame of the Kavinoky Theatre plays the role in this production, giving the part her individual stamp. Whereas Marchand had been stalwart in her control of her frustrations, Gayley allows the woman to slip, just perceptibly, into inebriation before nudging the evening back under her control.

Jim Mohr is very appealing as the husband, in a performance that renders the man far more vulnerable and considerably less laughable than Keene Curtis's original. The interpretation is very effective and serves the play admirably.

Lisa Ann Ludwig who often tilts toward the presentational, here employs her realistic side in a most satisfying portrayal of the daughter, originally played by Holland Taylor.

Paul Todaro wrestles with the role that is generally agreed to be the knot of the scripts difficulties. In this effort, he employs his familiar charm and good humor, and generously hands most of the laughs to those around

Depending on your personal history with Gurney, The Cocktail Hour is either worth waiting for, or nice to see again in this most handsome production, directed by David Lamb.

(Incidentally, the detail that blocked the play from production involves a possible marital infidelity on the part of Ann, the mother character. Marital infidelity is a common theme in Gurney's plays and also serves as a plot device in Ancestral Voices. The playwright has long since admitted that this real life event in these plays is a reference to his grandmother-not his mother).

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