

Sex, lies and the 12-Step process

“The Motherf**ker with the Hat” caused a big splash two years ago when it opened on Broadway, starring Chris Rock. Part of that splash was due to its title. The play tells of a New York drug dealer trying to get sober in AA, and his strange, circular relationship with his sponsor in that 12-Step program.



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A solid professional production of the show opened Saturday at the San Francisco Playhouse, where designer Bill English’s rich New York City set reveals a dumpsy bedroom in one cramped Manhattan apartment, and a tidy living room in another.

The action goes back and forth between the two locations, as the alcoholic drug dealer and his sponsor try to stay sober. Two women add sexual intrigue.

Everybody is lying

Before long we realize that most of the people in this play are lying. When a mysterious hat appears in a bedroom, fantasies of infidelity flame into life. The challenge for the audience is to figure out who is lying about what, and what is the truth.

There is a lot of discussion of the 12-Step recovery process. With all the drinking, drug use, lying, boasting and



FALLING OFF THE WAGON together are Victoria (Margo Hall) and Jackie (Gabriel Marin) in “The Motherf**ker with the Hat.”

philandering, however, the recovery process is not going well.

Much of the show is hilarious. Playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis writes exciting and amusing dialogue. In some ways, he is the second coming of David Mamet. As with Mamet’s best street characters, Guirgis’s street characters struggle with their colorful inarticulateness, to strong effect. What comes out of their mouths is funny and poignant, told in bizarre figures of speech.

While “The Motherf**ker with the Hat” is structured to reveal surprising lie after surprising lie, what’s missing is that the story doesn’t go beyond that. The play says basically that we all lie, then it demonstrates that over and over. Further, playwright Guirgis’s female characters function largely as sexual relationships for the men, and are not well developed in their own right.

Among the actors, Gabriel Marin is emotionally all over the place in an

impressive and moving performance as alcoholic ex-con Jackie, trying to get straight, find a job, and nurture his romance. Isabelle Ortega is his creepy coke-sniffing girlfriend, although she doesn’t project much of the sexual sensibility that the part seems to call for.

Touching, funny

Carl Lumby is the 12-Step sponsor whose secrets wreak havoc in the lives of others, including his wife (Margo Hall), a recovery dropout in her own right — drinking, drugging, angry and otherwise acting out. Rudy Guerrero is both touching and funny as a thoughtful, swishy gay cousin cooking empanadas on the fire escape, although his role shifts unsatisfactorily into a cartoon character in his last scene.

Throughout it all, sexual shenanigans threaten to shipwreck everyone’s recovery. It’s a mess.

“The Motherf**ker with the Hat” suggests that as humans we are incapable of doing anything but lie. In such a world of moral relativism, there is no stable ground. It is a disconcerting vision.

*For tickets to “The Motherf**ker with the Hat,” visit sfplayhouse.org, or call (415) 677-9596.*

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