

## Barrymore (Greenaway Theatre)



Actor/movie star John Barrymore (1882-1942) is now remembered more for his legendary drinking, carousing and divorces than for his work, as there is no film on his extraordinary *Hamlet* (1922) and his earlier *Richard III* (1920). He became a major film star during the 1920s and 1930s, working with Katherine Hepburn (*A Bill of Divorcement* - 1932), Greta Garbo (*Grand Hotel* - 1932), Norma Shearer (*Romeo & Juliet* - 1936) and siblings Lionel and Ethel (*Rasputin* - 1932), among dozens more.

William Luce wrote a fine biographical play on Barrymore, for which Christopher Plummer won a Tony Award (1997). It's now been revived at the Greenaway Theatre, featuring veteran character actor Gordon Goodman.

Luce sets his (essentially) one-man show (Matt Franta plays an off-stage voice of the prompter) in a New York theatre, a month before Barrymore's collapse and death from liver, kidney and heart disease, in May of 1942, after a lifetime of alcohol and cigarette abuse. He may also have had early Alzheimer's disease, which contributed to his being unable to remember lines (hence the need for a prompter).

But the stage was his element and Luce has him preparing for a one-night-only *Richard III*, with John welcoming us to hear him reminisce bitterly on his wives and on his other, better, triumphs, mostly as an actor. He keeps interrupting his rehearsal, to the grand annoyance of Frank, to inform us on his lives and careers, drinking all the while. As written, it's charming, funny and deeply saddening. For an actor of his talents, to have wasted much of his life in foolin' around and not taking himself more seriously, is disturbing. But actor Goodman finds the charisma and the glibness, as well as the seriousness underneath the mask. It's a fine performance, theatrical and intimate, and Franta goes us good voice. The off-stage presence is especially good in his "to hell with you" speech at the end.

Director Janet Miller continues to astonish with her deeply-rooted understanding of intimate theatricality, allowing the audience time to laugh as well as to reflect. Scott Walewski's theatre-setting is both cold and inviting, easy to look at. The Greenaway is a charming theatre, set on the Western edge of Fairfax High School. And they have free parking just north of the theatre - much needed as everything else is off-limits after 8pm.

Barrymore was, obviously, more than his legend, and Luce's version is eminently listenable, with Goodman making it eminently watchable. Go and see for yourself. Presented by Good People Theatre Company.

**BARRYMORE** plays at the Greenaway Theatre, 544 N. Fairfax Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90036. It plays through December 1st, 2013, Fridays and Saturdays at 8pm, Sundays at 7pm, with the matinee on Saturdays at 2pm.