Word Count (Body): 1001

MAMA HATED DIESELS. By Randal Myler and Dan Wheetman. Directed by Randal Myler. Denver Center Theatre Company, The Stage Theatre. 8 May 2010.

Meet Joe Six-Pack, the oft-cited character who has become the American *du jour* in our current *Zeitgeist*. Prominent in today's sociopolitical discourse, his name has become a rallying cry for the populist movement in the culture war raging between Main Street and Wall Street. As the hardworking, hard-living Everyman, Joe is the construction worker, the farmer, the cop on the beat. And in the Denver Center Theatre Company (DCTC) debut of *Mama Hated Diesels*, Joe is the "white knight of the highway:" the American trucker.

Co-created by Tony-nominated collaborators Randal Myler and Dan Wheetman, *Mama Hated Diesels* is a musical monology with a compiled score of 21 trucker-themed songs by more than 30 songwriters, ranging from Merle Haggard to Kris Kristofferson. Drawing from actual interviews, author/director Myler and co-author/music director Wheetman theatricalized the plight and pluck of the American trucker, bringing to the stage a lively ensemble of four nameless "truckers" (played by Brad Bellamy, Kathleen M. Brady, Mike Hartman, and Charles Weldon) and two "wives" (Jan Leslie Harding and Jeanne Paulsen). In its world premiere, DCTC's *Mama* was frequently engaging, compassionate, and tinged with wry humor; conversely, the work also veered into trite, romanticized reductionism.

Representing the latter was the simplistic nature of the libretto and kid-glove treatment given the overall production. Somewhat dismissing an existing American climate rife with anger and blame, the jokey, sentimental atmosphere of *Mama* seemed curiously devoid of raw, unvarnished human behavior. Although Myler and Wheetman's reported aim was to look "under the hood" of the American trucker, the folksy, familiar anecdotes delivered on stage often

reduced their talebearers to safe and predictable clichés, negating any deeper probe into their complicated, conflicted "Joe" personas. Accordingly, *Mama* repeatedly morphed into melodrama as the characters disparaged and bemoaned non-trucking Others (e.g., hostile, insensitive authorities and "citizen" drivers), positioning them as easy villains in a scenario of interstate turf wars. Yet, the homilies occasionally provided potent social commentary, along with opportunities for the talented DCTC actors to humanize their otherwise one-dimensional archetypes. For example, in a poignant group lamentation, an elderly Hartman emotionally recounted the demoralizing move from 30 years of truck ownership to schlepping for an impersonal trucking corporation; and Weldon decried the satellite tracking systems which treat truckers like "clones," while Harding plaintively concluded that there is "no more courtesy" in today's industry. Such sentiments offered glimpses of a relevant theme: the diminishment of Joe, the worker who built America by the sweat of his brow and toiled to achieve the American Dream, only to be devalued and discarded in an increasingly exploitative corporatist culture.

But any real sense of righteous anger or corporate/class warfare in the production was undercut by the cuddly nature of each character's complaint and the quickness with which it was chuckled away. If the Other is simplistically positioned as *Mama*'s villain, the "trucker" (and "wife") is similarly and sentimentally hailed as the stoic, whimsical, heart-of-gold, highway-smart hero. On the DCTC stage, darker topics such as misogyny, drug abuse, and racism were given drive-by treatments by the ensemble, but any troubling anecdote was punctuated by a note of levity. As a tough-as-nails lady trucker, Brady comically boasts of "sneaking" behind her husband's back to get her license and besting other dubious male drivers. As a husband and father, Bellamy casually mentions his quick victory over amphetamine abuse, only to later revel in a jovial account of "lot lizards"--the prostitutes who haunt the truck stops. Most telling was the

joking manner in which African-American Weldon related the tale of driving through Wyoming while hearing, over the radio, another trucker voice surprise at his inability to "find a nigger" in the territory. After Weldon and his young black driving partner radio back that, "their whole damn families are niggers," they hear the reply: "Found one!" Here, a potentially disturbing moment of ugly truth regarding race and the trucking community was not only left unexplored but was also disarmed, treated as an innocuous joke by Weldon, who delivered the radioed response as a punch line, laughing along with the audience.

Both the multifaceted reality of modern-day Joe and the limitations of *Mama*'s "Joe" were highlighted by Vicki Smith's scenic design. Effectively expanding the world of the play, Smith implemented screens above the stage with projected photos (by award-winning photographer Jim Steinberg) of genuine truck drivers, 18-wheelers, storms, truck stops, and landscapes. Yet, *Mama*'s performers were confined to a generic replica of a roadside diner. Thus, as the photographic montage offered a candid pictorial of harsh road life, complex in scope, movement, and drama, the characters below were denied such attributes. Specifically, the actors were relegated to sitting at tables, on barstools, or pacing center stage to deliver/share monologues. Similarly constricted was the truck stop's band (Rhonda Coullet, Jason Edwards, David Miles Keenan, James Cruce, and David P. Jackson). Although this group performed every musical number, it was incongruously placed behind the actors. And while a lone band member might sporadically mosey through the diner, the musicians most often delivered the driving rhythms of the iconic (yet mostly non-integrated, nonspecific, and diversionary) songs from stationary upstage positions. Further, as the production progressed, the characters' nonparticipation in the numbers became particularly jarring. Although the "truckers" and "wives" appeared to enjoy the musical reveries, their static involvement (metronomic head-bobbing/toe-

tapping) undermined much of the score's power. In short, these "Joes" were seemingly deprived the chance to vocally and physically invest in the musical soundtrack of their lives.

All of the aforementioned elements culminated in a particularly illuminative moment. After Hartman recounted the loss of his truck after 30 years, the band performed "This Old Road" while he stood pensively downstage, flanked by projected photographs of a young, proud man and his rig. Ironically, during this interlude, it was the real-life trucker in the untouched photo who commanded the stage and whose authentic story begged to be told, exemplifying the overall missed opportunity by *Mama* to truly examine the soul, psyche, and modern-day crisis of an original American Joe.

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