

Matt & Ben: Gender Confusion

By Ed Brownson

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Jennifer Dean as Ben Affleck and Sarah Mitchell as Matt Damon in Ben & Matt.

Matt & Ben presents a funny story line, two hilarious performances, a fast paced script, professional directing and a set making good use of the text and stage. So... we're cruising, enjoying ourselves. Right? Well...

Ok, we are enjoying. Really. But this question keeps needling: What is the point of casting two women in a straight play (in more ways than one) about Matt Damon and Ben Affleck? After the laughs, after the show is over, this needle gets sharp.

Matt & Ben, presented by Unidentified Theatre Company at the Off-Market Theater, opens with young Matt and Ben, impatient with success's protracted arrival, changing tactics from acting to screenwriting. They've hit on the brilliantly unoriginal idea of adapting *Catcher In The Rye* for film. In mid-goof-off, the script for *Good Will Hunting* falls from the ceiling. Literally. It's a cool script: they see that right away. So where did it come from? And more to the point: what to do with it?

Jennifer Dean and Sarah Mitchell are Ben and Matt, and they miss no opportunity to mug a ham for the greater glory of our entertainment. Mitchell's Matt is the talented but not-quite-trained cerebral youth of legend, trying to balance ambition with doing the right thing. Mitchell shows us Matt's inner struggles humorously without burdening us with "significance." Dean's Affleck also riffs on her character's PR: an affable party boy who wants to be famous so he can get laid.

Dean also does a wickedly funny turn as Gwynneth Paltrow—sort of a Ghost-Of-Scripts-Future cameo—that is so dead-on we know who she is before she opens her mouth. "Food? Never touch the stuff," Dean's Gwynneth pouts, as she sashays the stage yakking about herself and eyeing Ben's Hostess Cupcake.

Christopher Jenkins' direction is sharp. He focuses his actors squarely at the best in the script then gets out of their way. Ted Crimy and Cat Stevans, lighting and set design, do well with the minimalist Off-Market venue. But that gender question...

The problem is, the roles—as written—could easily be played by two men. Nothing is added by casting women and something is lost, namely the audience's attention while we try to puzzle it all out.

The authors intend the cross casting. Why? To avoid irritating the play's celebrity subjects? Then why are we watching these two instead of some anonymous Tom and Bob? Maybe the authors think women bring some unique illumination to the situation. (They don't.) And how about those early rumors of a more-than-scriptwriting relationship between Ben and Matt? That topic is avoided scrupulously, even under the cover of women in the roles.

These questions wouldn't matter much if the play was only a farce. But it's not. It takes a serious turn into the meaning of friendship with dialog authentic for women but unlikely to come out of most straight men's mouths.

So, where are we? One place we're not is the one where merely putting a woman in a man's role (or vice versa) without reason or explanation says anything. Instead it comes across as awkward and distracting, like those sitcoms where a gay character is assigned the buddy role, then is not allowed to actually be gay.

Is this enough to ruin the play? No, but it does inflict damage. Any time your audience spends the first third trying to figure out the reasoning behind a particular staging decision you risk losing contact.

See *Matt & Ben*. You will be merrily entertained, and maybe you can untangle the women-as-men-not-having-an-affair-but-emoting-like-women knot at the heart of the play.

Matt & Ben runs until Dec. (Thurs. to Sun.) at the Off-Market Theater, 965 Mission Street

I. Bosom buddies

II. 'Matt & Ben' plays Off-Market



When Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick are ready to move on from the new Broadway production of *The Odd Couple*, maybe Matt Damon and Ben Affleck could be convinced to take over. Damon is a match for fussy Felix, and Affleck should have no trouble with the slovenly Oscar, at least according to the Matt and Ben in *Matt & Ben*.

This runaway hit from the 2002 New York Fringe Festival has become something of a national phenomenon. Productions have sprouted up in cities from coast to coast, and San Francisco has gotten into the act with the Unidentified Theatre Company's production at the Off-Market Theatre.



Jennifer Dean and Sarah Mitchell in *Matt & Ben*.

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It's not hard to see why it's so popular. With only two characters and a simple set, the play is a producer's dream. Plus it rides on the popularity of its namesake characters, even though

the laughs come largely at the expense of this exaggerated version of the real Matt and Ben. And there are a lot of laughs packed into its mere 65 minutes.

Plus there's a twist. Matt and Ben are played by two women. Authors Mindy Kaling and Brenda Withers created the roles in New York to considerable acclaim, and SF actors Sarah Mitchell and Jennifer Dean are the talented pair in the local production.

The play takes place just before Damon and Affleck collaborated on the Oscar-winning screenplay for *Good Will Hunting*, and speculates that the script literally fell into their laps from some mysterious source. They know it's a good story, but can't decide if it's a blessing or some sort of curse in disguise.

As they argue about the script and other matters of their fledgling careers, these childhood friends reveal distinctly different attitudes toward life and work. Damon is the uptight careerist, while Affleck is the lazy, charming pretty boy who thinks sensitivity is "so gay."

The play is filled with humor that can be both broad and insider, and some awareness of the real Damon-Affleck story (and pop culture) will be helpful. But much of the comedy derives from the performances, and Mitchell and Dean consistently deliver in director Christopher Jenkins' amiable and at times highly physical production.

One of the funniest moments comes when Matt and Ben are trying to perform the script, with Matt in the role he would eventually play on screen and Ben taking the Minnie Driver part. Ben's attempts at an English accent start out as broad Cockney before morphing into something like a German Katharine Hepburn. In a couple of fantasy sequences, Mitchell is wonderful as a spaced out J.D. Salinger, and Dean does a very credible impression of Gwyneth Paltrow.

Matt & Ben is short-and-sweet theater, a satire that makes few demands of its audience. It's chillaxin', as Ben might say.

Actresses score with 'Matt & Ben'

By Chad Jones, STAFF WRITER

BAY AREA audiences are used to gender bending. But what's with Matt Damon and Ben Affleck being played by women in "Matt & Ben," a spirited comedy by Mindy Kaling and Brenda Withers?



A New York Fringe Festival and off-Broadway hit several years ago, "Matt & Ben" was originally

performed by its authors, and now it's popping up all over the country, including a sharp production that opened Friday at San Francisco's Off-Market Theater.

GOOD WILL WRITING: Sarah Mitchell (left) plays Matt Damon and Jennifer Dean portrays Ben Affleck in the comedy "Matt & Ben" at the Off-Market Theatre in San Francisco.

So now that Kaling and Withers aren't performing the show, wouldn't it be just as easy to cast two men as Matt and Ben? The answer is most wholeheartedly no. The world already has a male Matt and Ben, and that's plenty. Minnie

Driver, Winona Ryder, Gwyneth Paltrow and Jennifer Lopez would likely agree.

Part of the fun of "Matt & Ben" is watching two women — Sarah Mitchell and Jennifer Dean in San Francisco — discover their version of masculinity, especially as it pertains to two childhood friends struggling to become adults and to carve out a future in show business.

What could be nothing more than an hourlong sketch becomes, in the hands of the actors and director Christopher Jenkins, something a little more substantial. Granted, the main goal here is laughs, and there are plenty.

But the Kaling and Withers' script is sharp enough to cut into a meatier subtext about personal and professional jealousies, the nature of deep friendship and the fool's gold shine of fame and fortune. If nothing else, the play answers the question that has been troubling all of us for years: How did two rubes like Damon and Affleck end up writing the Academy Award-winning script for "Good Will Hunting"?

In this version, the script literally falls from the ceiling and onto the grungy sofa in Ben's dingy Somerset, Mass., apartment.

The only real decoration in the apartment (set by Cat Stevans), aside from the Boston Red Sox curtains, is a movie poster for "School Ties," a bomb in which both Damon and Affleck appeared.

So into this hovel comes the answer to Ben and Matt's problems: a beautifully written character study of a working-class genius with a good buddy whose charisma disguises the fact that he may be slightly retarded.

The question then becomes who plays which role? Harvard dropout Matt (Mitchell) assumes he'll take the role of Will, the genius, which leaves Ben (Dean) with the much less demanding role of Chucky.

Egos are bruised and truths are told. Ben tells Matt he has a fat behind ("Fat Damon"), and Matt tells Ben, the guy who combined the words "chillin'" and "relaxin'" into "chillaxin'," he has no talent and should aim to be an action movie hero.

Before the play erupts into fisticuffs (fight choreography by Christopher Morrison), the boys receive two very funny otherworldly visits: one from Gwyneth (Dean), a future ex-love of

Affleck's, who comes offering Hollywood advice and the observation that David Schwimmer has one expression and looks like a mushroom. The other is from J.D. Salinger (Mitchell), the reclusive author of "The Catcher in the Rye," a book that Matt and Ben happen to be trying to adapt into a screenplay

(" 'Adaptation' is the sincerest form of flattery," Ben says).

The play has great fun skewering the Affleck-Damon phenomenon. Since the play first appeared in 2002, both actors have suffered and survived. Damon finally broke through as a box-office star with "The Bourne Identity" and "Ocean's 11." He's now engaged and has a reputation as a hard worker and someone who takes chances ("The Talented Mr. Ripley").

Affleck proved a bankable ("Armageddon," "Pearl Harbor") if not a great actor ("Gigli," "Surviving Christmas," "Jersey Girl," "Daredevil," "Paycheck" and the list goes on), though his greatest claim to fame at the moment is his relationships with women named Jennifer (Lopez and now wife Garner).

Imagining how their careers began — with a push from the eternal screenplay known as fate — is a nice reminder that it's really more a matter of being in the right place at the right time than it is about talent. Celebrity, it turns out, is really a fluke, a curse and a painful test of character.

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