

## TOOTH AND CLAW

*Survival of the fittest on Broadway.*

BY JOHN LAHR

“War is God’s way of teaching Americans geography,” Ambrose Bierce joked. In Rajiv Joseph’s “Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo” (sluggishly directed by Moisés Kaufman, at the Richard Rodgers), it’s also His way of teaching big cats metaphysics. “Zoo is hell,” the title character says as he forlornly paces his cage. “Ask any animal. Rather be shot up and eaten than be stuck in a fucking zoo ten thousand miles from where you were supposed to be.” The play is based on an actual incident in 2003, in which a U.S. Army sergeant at a morale-boosting barbecue at the Baghdad zoo lost part of his arm when he reportedly proffered a chicken kebab to a tiger, which was then killed by another soldier. In the early days of fighting and looting in Iraq, many zoo animals escaped and were later found starving; the story of the tiger seemed to epitomize the recklessness of the American occupation, stirring international outrage, including a response in this magazine. Joseph, who was then a graduate student in New York University’s dramatic-writing program, found the news item haunting, and he soon envisioned a ten-minute one-act, with two soldiers and a tiger who addressed his thoughts directly to the audience.

Joseph’s first instincts were his best: to get the Tiger talking and to allow us to see the mayhem in Iraq through his green eyes. Like the soldiers who guard him, the Tiger has been transported into an unfathomable, anarchic environment; he is scared, aggressive, and deracinated, but with this difference: he is also funny. And who, in principle, is funnier than Robin Williams, a man with a steely, snappish wit, a crazy gene, and a

manic motormouth that he often uses to fan the embers of anger? At first, as Williams’s Tiger gripes about the zoo’s lions—“I am bigger than those motherfuckers”—playfulness seems to be what’s on offer. The Baghdad Tiger is a cool cat: in the middle of a war, he’s smart enough to stay put, unlike the lions, who make a run for it and get themselves killed.



Robin Williams in “Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo.”

“Leo—the head lion—I mean, they were all named fucking Leo—Leo calls out to me just before he takes off, ‘Hey, Tiger, you gotta come with,’” Williams says, sporting a bushy salt-and-pepper beard and tatty gray schmatte, whose drabness signals his caged decline. The Tiger is equally scornful of *Homo sapiens*. One of the guards, Tom (Glenn Davis), tries to

provoke him by holding out a Slim Jim. “This is what I’m talking about,” the Tiger says to the audience. “Pure stupidity. I’m a fucking tiger.” Then he bites the soldier’s hand off and is killed by another soldier, Kev (Brad Fleischer)—who later kills himself out of guilt over the Tiger’s execution.

At this early point in the play—which marks the end of Joseph’s initial sketch—“Bengal Tiger” takes a strategic detour. The focus shifts to other characters, and tigersity gives way to verbosity. What began as an inventive expression of moral outrage quickly turns inchoate. The Tiger is now a ghost, wandering like a zombie through the plotlines of other characters, and neither he nor Williams escapes from the trap of abstraction in which the playwright snares them. By the end of the evening, the stage is populated almost entirely by ghosts. The thing about ghosts is that they have no agency. They hover, observe, lament, and frighten, but they can’t actually *do* much. This may work on the page, as a metaphor of barbarity and the ruin that mankind has made of the world, but it is listless and numbing on the stage. The scenes lack a pulse; they have no rhythm.

“It’s basically like ‘Our Town’ in Baghdad” is how Williams described the play on “Live! with Regis and Kelly.” No, that is exactly what “Bengal Tiger” is *not*. Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town” has carefully constructed characters, a backstory, a narrator, a dramatic trajectory, and a well-modulated moral voice. “Bengal Tiger,” which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, is arbitrary in its construction, haphazard in its characterizations, and vague in its moral argument. Why, for instance, is the maimed Tom allowed to return to duty with an artificial hand? (The actual soldier’s arm was so badly damaged that he couldn’t even salute.) Why does the oafish Kev become a brainiac ghost? Why does Saddam Hussein’s son Uday (Hrach Titizian), who has been killed by Tom, carry his brother’s severed head around in a bag and talk to it? The answer is that the

author wants them to: the actions are symbolic without being dramatic, sensational without being truthful.

"The Tiger seems to be almost sleepwalking," the stage directions say of the ghost, a sort of Topper with big teeth. In the twentieth century, the somnambulist was a familiar comic archetype, a totem of the culture's optimism; in comedians' pratfalls and in Broadway comedies, he rebounded from every fall, reborn and rewarded for his innocence. "Bengal Tiger" registers the darkening of the national mood: instead of bouncing back, the sleepwalkers of "Bengal Tiger" remain in a kind of hellish holding pattern of cosmic indifference. Even in this purgatory, rapacity rules; the Tiger can't stop murdering things. He appears to Kev with a carcass in hand. "For a good two, three hours I was a vegetarian. But guess what? Vegetables taste like shit," he says, adding, "We're just stuck here, son. Mastodons in the tar pit of life-after-death."

At the end of "Bengal Tiger," the Tiger gives his "rules of the hunt": "Be still. Watch. Listen." That's exactly the strategy that the baby-faced, bow-tied hunter-gatherer J. Pierrepont Finch (Daniel Radcliffe) uses to claw his way into the executive suite of the World Wide Wicket Company, in Rob Ashford's flamboyant revival of the 1961 musical "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" (at the Al Hirschfeld, with music and lyrics by Frank Loesser and book by Abe Burrows, Jack Weinstock, and Willie Gilbert). We watch with delight as Finch, with his trusty "how-to" book in hand—"The Dastard's Guide to Fame and Fortune" is the subtitle of Shepherd Mead's original best-seller, on which the show is based—rises by cunning degrees from window washer to chairman of the board.

"How to Succeed," which won the 1962 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, ushered in the Kennedy years, and it exudes that era's confidence and cynical sophistication. The musical's tongue is always blithely in its cheek. Nevertheless, it assumes an abundance (and an innocence) that now seem far away: a time when jobs were plentiful, when secretaries—remember secretaries?—dreamed of marrying the boss and were "happy to keep his dinner warm/while he goes onward and upward," and when a sense of bless-

ing somehow seeped into every craven corner. "Remember, mediocrity is not a mortal sin," Finch sings in "Brotherhood of Man," an anthem dedicated to his advancement.

Every nanosecond of this production is eloquent with craft and wit. Ashford's choreography is particularly fresh—he has his well-drilled ensemble leaping on mail-room boxes, crawling like desert-island castaways for their morning coffee, and squaring off in a hilarious football scrum. His inventiveness, bolstered by Catherine Zuber's beautiful costumes, Derek McLane's clever set, and Howell Binkley's exciting light design, is an elegant fit with Loesser's dashing score. The show is luminous. I was especially amused by Miss Jones (Ellen Harvey), the boss's battle-axe secretary, who finally gets to strut her stuff at the finale, hitting the high notes and being handed around to the chorus boys like nuts at Christmas. Rosemary Pilkington (the fetching Rose Hemingway), a secretary who sets her pink toque at Finch and bags her upwardly mobile man, is appropriately adorable; and Tammy Blanchard as Hedy La Rue, the boss's loosey-goosey squeeze, brings an unfailing ditziness to the party. But the evening's laurels go to Radcliffe and the towering John Larroquette, as the boss, J. B. Biggley. Radcliffe, who is short of leg but long on heart, comes up to Larroquette's armpit; they look and perform hilariously together. Radcliffe's youthful brightness is a perfect foil for Larroquette's dopey severity.

About Radcliffe: he doesn't have a big voice; he's not a great dancer; he is not as impish or as madcap as Robert Morse, who originated the part. However, he is a smart actor, and he conveys his intelligence and his desire across the footlights, along with a sweet, square-jawed decency that is compelling. The ambition of the character and the actor coalesce; Radcliffe throws every ounce of his being into the show. You want him to win, and he does, never more sensationally than when he is leapfrogging over Larroquette in the football song "Grand Old Ivy." Radcliffe tumbles, glides, does backflips, and gets right in there with the hardworking chorus. He's an English lad at the center of a first-rate, high-stepping American musical. Radcliffe is having the time of his life; you feel his joy. As they say in the part of London where I live, "Nice one, mate." ♦