**THE THEATRE**

**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 guard him, the Tiger has been transmuted into an unfathomable, anarchic zombie through the plotlines of other characters, and neither he nor Williams escapes from the trap of abstraction in which the playwright snarethem. 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 characterization, 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 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.

"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 tigerosity 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.

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author wants them to: the actions are symbolic without being dramatic, sensa-
tional without being truthful.

“The Tiger seems to be almost sleep-
walking,” 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’
prattfalls and in Broadway comedies, he
rebounded from every fall, reborn and re-
warded 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 cos-
mic indifference. Even in this purgatory,
raptacity rules; the Tiger can’t stop mur-
dering 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, add-
ing, “We’re just stuck here, son. Mas-
todons 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 Ash-
ford’s flamboyant revival of the 1961 mu-
sical “How to Succeed in Business With-
out Really Trying” (at the Al Hirschfeld,
with music and lyrics by Frank Loesser
and book by Abe Burrows, Jack Wein-
stock, 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 sub-
title 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 sophistica-
tion. The musical’s tongue is always blithely in its cheek. Nevertheless, it as-
sumes an abundance (and an innocence)
that now seem far away: a time when jobs
were plentiful, when secretaries—re-
member secretaries?—dreamed of mar-
ying 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 Cathe-
rine 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 lu-
mious. 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 Pil-
lington (the fetching Rose Heming-
way), a secretary who sets her pink toque
at Finch and bags her upwardly mo-
bile 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 Lar-
roquette’s armpit; they look and perform
hilariously together. Radcliffe’s youthful
brightness is a perfect foil for Lar-
roquette’s dopey severity.

About Radcliffe: he doesn’t have a big
voice; he’s not a great dancer; he is not as
impush or as madcap as Robert Morse,
who originated the part. However, he is a
smart actor, and he conveys his intelli-
gence 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 sensationall than when he is
leapfrogging over Larroquette in the foot-
ball song “Grand Old Ivy.” Radcliffe tum-
bles, 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.”