



## REVIEW: ‘Hats’ Off to Warehouse Theatre’s Stylish Sci-Fi Farce Premiere

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Matt Reece basks in the light of 1930’s noir in “Important Hats of the 20th Century.”

**BY SANDY STAGGS**  
**DRAMA CRITIC**

Pajamas at the supermarket? Denim in restaurants? T-shirts at the theatre? For Chanel’s sake, this play is about Art! Wear some stylish threads and a fabulous Sunday hat to the regional premiere of “Important Hats of the Twentieth Century” at The Warehouse Theatre.

This wacky science-fiction screwball comedy by “Orange is the New Black” scribe Nick Jones splits the seams of the absurd world of fashion and art, greed and consumerism, and an intemperate, scandalous media. Cleverly framed as a madcap pastiche of satire, melodrama and noir, “Important Hats” could be taken as the brainchild of H.G. Wells and Mel Brooks (if they worked for SNL), and its wit is matched only by its superb cast and innovative design team.

And Friday’s opening of was notable not only for the first production of this far-fetched farce about two rival fashion designers in post-Depression Manhattan since its November 2015 premiere Off-Broadway at the Manhattan Theatre Club, but also for the official debut of The Warehouse Theatre’s new Producing Artistic Director [Mike Sablone](#), who jetted to Greenville just in time for the premiere.

An ecstatic audience embraced both with unfettered enthusiasm as the company embarks on a new age of artistic splendor under Sablone and Jason D. Johnson, recently promoted to Managing Director.

Science fiction on stage is not unheard of: take last year's glossy "Brave New World" musical adaptation at North Carolina Stage Company, and of course, "The Rocky Horror Show" and "Little Shop of Horrors." But non-musicals in this genre are quite rare.

And whereas the theatre's previous outing "In the Next Room (or the Vibrator Play)" was concerned with the female human condition of hysteria, "Important Hats" is just plain hysterical, and very much in the satirical vein of the 43<sup>rd</sup> season opener "Urinetown."

Josh Jeffers (most recently in the touring production of "Twelfth Night") plays Sam Greevy, the anointed "King of Dresses" and the hottest emerging fashion designer of 1937. His trademark haute couture consists of one-of-kind outrageously flamboyant dresses for women, with "lots of little balls" with zing and sparkle.

But his fame and spotlight dim when strange but comfortable bourgeoisie apparel like sweatshirts and track suits begin flooding boutiques and retail stores.

These regular garments for "regular people" are knock-offs from items retrieved from a teenager's hip-hop wardrobe in 1998 by a fashion school dropout-turned-janitor Paul Roms (Christopher Joel Onken) with a time travel device – a hat – stolen from his scientist employer.

Veteran Warehouse player Matt Reece returns after appearing in "In the Next Room" as the gumshoe fashion reporter TB Doyle (and Greevy's clandestine lover) ripped right from the Sam Spade-mold of noir detective films. Spouting jargon of the day ("kid," "dames," etc.), Reece gives an understated, seasoned turn that makes acting seem so effortless.

And as the only straight shooter in the story, Reece doesn't ham it up. His motive is pure and predicated on love, not fame like Greevy or greed like Roms. His motive is pure and predicated on love, not fame like Greevy or greed like Roms.

The P.I. narrative is also told from his perspective too, since the chaos begins when he happens upon the burglary investigation of Cromwell's lab.

Jeffers lends reams of flamboyance, vanity and insecurity to Greevy, who is ironically married with children. And he most effective when he is proselytizing on Paris trends and the merits of feminine glamour, not Roms' unisex potato sack from the future.

Onken, who was a Bohemian artist in "In the Next Room," plays the arch villain intent on mass-producing cotton into gold as loathsome and singular almost to a fault. He wholeheartedly lands the furtive and devious evil persona as well as the buffoonery necessary for a successful spoof, but Jones' doesn't linger long enough with this stock character to allow any empathy for his quest for riches.

[Jay Briggs](#), longtime Warehouse collaborator and currently the Director of Education at Mill Mountain Theatre in Roanoke, Virginia, eloquently directs this farce with flair and remarkable on-point precision, inveigling every ounce of hilarity from this script and the outstanding cast.

The ensemble plays a kaleidoscope of supporting characters with equal aplomb and expertise, often from character to character within seconds.

Anne Tromsness, the sole woman in the main cast, is hereby christened the “Mistress of Accents.” Remember her Russian tongue as the bitter grown-up Clara from “The Nutcracker” in “Christmas on the Rocks”? Here she delights with impeccable technique as a German nurse and in, 1998, as the teenager’s chain-smoking freaked-out mom.

Brock Koonce (who heads to Lexington, KY for the Southeastern Theatre Conference after this run to represent our state in the Mill Town Player’s production “Of Mice and Men”), demonstrates his comedic caliber in splendid tongue-in-cheek fashion as a radio announcer who wields his misguided powers of observation on air throughout the proceedings.

Andy Croston, Warehouse Operations Manager, marks his first appearance on stage since 2015’s “The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged),” and in a fat suit as Dr. Cromwell, the “brilliant overweight scientist” and inventor of the dimension-crossing hat.

Dave LaPage perfectly captures the foibles and demeanor of teenage angst of the late 1990s with grunge bangs and a can’t-be-bothered attitude to match.

And as the teen’s father, Matt Christian Jones makes his company debut in a role that isn’t heavy on dialogue, but he gets in a lot of stage presence.

Emmy-nominated for “Orange is the New Black,” Nick Jones already had several theatrical comedies of note such as “The Coward,” “Trevor,” “Straight up Vampire: the History of Vampires in Colonial Pennsylvania as Performed to the Music of Paula Abdul,” and the adult puppet rock musical “Jollyship the Whiz-Bang.”

He offers a refreshing voice and unique brand of laughter that pays off handsomely in the exhilarating second act that leaves one expecting the unexpected as it whizzes by with the frenetic pacing of “The Front Page” and the situational spectacle of “Bill and Tex’s Excellent Adventures,” as well as an air of revisionist foreshadowing of a certain radio broadcast the following year.”

The production is staged in the Warehouse round with a central wooden platform which, at first glance, seems rather pedestrian. But this utilitarian set with post-modern aesthetics by Rick Connor, who works for an architect firm by day, is quite sophisticated and manages to express some 25 locations in many enterprising ways that we won’t spoil here. His round is flanked by Depression era window sashes and reflects the sprouting Manhattan skyscrapers, especially when illuminated by lighting designer Montana Kern.

Fashions from both eras were designed by Allison M. Steadman and Marc Gwinn’s excellent and many sound effects add dimension to the fantasy tone.

This production also includes the talents of Louise M. Ochart as stage manager, Bill Munoz as fight choreographer, David Sims as production manager, Jonathan Bull as technical director, Wylder Cooper as master electrician and 2017 Conservatory residents Micah Israel and Rebecca Whitten as assistant stage managers.

My favorite line of the play is spoken by Reece, who retorts after being accused of possessing no talent: “I became a critic because I believe in promoting the work of others.” And that’s what Carolina Curtain Call is all about.

Blue Star Theatre discounts for veterans and active military apply throughout the run. Thursday, February 2nd is Young Professionals Night sponsored by West End Dental.

*“Important Hats of the Twentieth Century” runs Thursdays through Sundays through February 18 at The Warehouse Theater, 37 Augusta Street in Greenville. Call (864) 235-6948 or visit [www.warehousetheatre.com](http://www.warehousetheatre.com).*