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Theater review: 'Moonlight and Magnolias' mixes classic Hollywood, the Old South and historic unease

By Amanda Nelson Special to The Roanoke Times May 1, 2017



Amanda Sox in a scene from "Moonlight and Magnolias," a Mill Mountain Theater production about the making of the classic film "Gone with the Wind."

Photo courtesy Alicia Varcoe/

It's 1939. America is emerging from the depths of the Great Depression. It's the Golden Age of Hollywood. Lights up on a well-appointed office on a Hollywood studio lot.

"You didn't read the book?" the producer incredulously shouts at the newly hired screenwriter. The "book" he is referring to is Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind." The producer is the iconic movie mogul David O. Selznick. And, the writer is one of Hollywood's most accomplished, Ben Hecht.

And, so opens Mill Mountain Theatre's production of Ron Hutchinson's comedy "Moonlight and Magnolias." Inspired by real events, and performed on a set beautifully designed by Jimmy Ray Ward, the play tells the story of the re-writing of the movie script for "Gone with the Wind." At the top of the play we learn that Selznick has just stopped production of the film in order to bring in Hecht to do a rewrite and Victor Fleming to replace the film's original director.

The play takes place over the course of one week when Hecht, Selznick and Fleming work around the clock to rewrite the script. Selznick believes this is the only way to salvage the project. Fleming is doubtful: "He's [Hecht] going to turn 1,037 pages into 130?" And, that's just what the three set out to do. Assisting them is Selznick's long-suffering secretary, Mrs. Poppenghul (deftly played by Amanda Sox).

Because Hecht (a wonderfully irreverent Patrick Halley) has not read the novel, Selznick (a highly charged Sid Solomon) and Fleming (an affable and delightfully awkward J. Richey Nash) decide to act it out for him.

Sleep deprivation, hunger and the incredible pressure to draft a workable script lead to zany antics. This production's director, Jay Briggs, has chosen to play up the physical pratfalls and witty repartee in the script.

And, while wry wit and physical gags abound in the play, there is an undercurrent of unease, a malaise that unsettles. As Hecht says, "Gone with the Wind" is "an elegy for the Old South." A South and a time that many want to leave behind. And, the play's setting, 1939, was a time of disruption and uncertainty as fascism swept through Europe and anti-Semitism was on the rise in the United States.

Hutchinson's script repeatedly reminds the audience that Selznick and Hecht were Hollywood insiders who, at the same time, were outsiders because they were Jewish. Over the course of the play, Selznick and Hecht discuss power and politics. They question motives and responsibility. At one point Selznick relents to Hecht, "I'm not a man of ideas, like you."

Ultimately, this is a comedy, and while Hutchinson touches on larger and deeper themes, this is an homage to the magic of movie making. "Ask yourselves why we do it?" Selznick says to Hecht and Fleming. "Do you know another way to live forever?"

And, while "tomorrow is another day," you only have until Sunday to see "Moonlight and Magnolias" on Mill Mountain Theatre's Trinkle Main Stage.

Mill Mountain Theatre's "Moonlight and Magnolias"

When: Wednesday through Saturday, 7:30 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 2 p.m.

Where: Mill Mountain Theatre, Center in the Square, 1 Market Street S.E.

Tickets: \$20-\$40

Contact: millmountain.org, 342-5730