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A CurtainUp Los Angeles Review *Beautiful City*

By [Laura Hitchcock](#)



Rob Nagle (L), Michael Patrick McGill in Beautiful City

In the first scene of *Beautiful City*, developer Tony Raft assures architect Paul Gallagher that this city's citizens aren't poor, they just haven't made any money yet. This self-delusion sounds strikingly familiar. In Los Angeles, you hear it every day.

Although Canadian playwright George F. Walker calls his play a parable, he has a prickly way with delusion, broadening his characters to almost comic-strip proportions, then perforating their obtuse violence with humor. He begins with the mysterious illness that overtakes Paul in Tony's office while forced to survey the model of a mall that is Tony's dream of self-expression. The buildings will be connected by underground tunnels to which only owners will have keys, thus preserving them from the hoi polloi on the streets.

Paul's encounters include Jane, a candy-striper hospital volunteer; her mother Gina May, a self-declared witch whose brother-in-law Rolly Moore is a low-level criminal with a bald and dangerous son Stevie, Tony's mother Mary, a grotesque Mafia Don-ness; and policewoman Dian Black. The conflicts between the developer family, the criminal family, and the witch's family are ultimately mediated by the policewoman. Although justice is served and Paul is healthier, he is as bewildered as ever.

All this leaves us with a parable that feels very realistic, although an American writer might have used a different style. Director Martha Demson,

herself Canadian, punches it up for the Open Fist stage by heightening the shouting level, particularly in the women. It leavens the dialogue but lessens the choices the actors might have made. However, the rhythms are right and it all makes sense.

Open Fist brings its usual excellent production values to the play, including Donna Marquet's scenic design which alternates panels of sepia photographs with dark tunnel-like spaces and evokes the warmth and botanical flavor of Gina Mae's apartment by the simple device of a flowered window shade. R. Charles Otte's lighting design mirrors the shadowed confusion of Walker's concept.

Rob Nagle plays Paul as an artist numbed to anguish by commercial necessity; Michael Patrick McGill makes Tony an almost innocent developer, immersed in his own vision but controlled by his mother, powerfully played as your worst-case-scenario schoolteacher by Nicola Hersh. Bjorn Johnson is riveting as Rolly, a constantly busy low-level thief who nonetheless has material the witch wants to make something of; Hepburn Jamieson is a warm strong witch and Kappa Victoria Wood her daughter, who has the capacity to find something beyond the cliché she plays. Tisha Terrasini Banker is lean and tough as Dian and Rod Sell rattles the stage as the perennially terrorized Michael.

This is a particularly relevant play for this company which lost their own home to development recently. Now in the former Actors Gang space on Santa Monica Boulevard, they are still searching for an ideal home. They bring an interesting range of both foreign and domestic theater to the Los Angeles scene which should be nurtured.

BEAUTIFUL CITY

Playwright: George F. Walker

Director: Martha Demson

Cast: Michael Patrick McGill (Tony Raft), Rob Nagle (Paul Gallagher), Nicola Hersh (Mary Raft), Kappa Victoria Wood (Jane Sabatini), Rod Sell (Michael Gallagher), David J. Wright (Stevie Moore), Hepburn Jamieson (Gina Mae Sabatini), Tisha Terrasini Banker (Dian Black), Bjorn Johnson (Rolly Moore).

Set Design: Donna Marquet

Lighting Design: R. Charles Otte

Costume Design: Ina Russell

Sound Design: Tim Labor

Fight Choreography: Patrick Tuttle

Mall Model: Shawn MacAulay

Running Time: Two hours with one intermission

Running Dates: December 15-February 3, 2007; no performances December 19-January 4.

Where: Open Fist Theatre, 6209 Santa Monica Blvd, Los Angeles. (323) 882-6912

Reviewed by Laura Hitchcock on December 15.