

Oh, Mary!

By Cole Escola

Directed by Sam Pinkleton

Lucille Lortel Theatre

New York, NY

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Reviewed by Philip Brankin

Thinking about *Oh, Mary!*—a play set during the close of the American Civil War—I cannot help but conjure up a line from the comedic persona Philomena Cunk as she ruminates on the life of Abraham Lincoln in the BBC mockumentary *Cunk on Earth*. In her noted droll style, she deadpans, “Lincoln’s story didn’t have a happy ending. Five days after the North won, a terrible fate befell him. He was forced to go to the theatre to watch a play.” This is the level of dark-humored irreverence found in Cole Escola’s sold-out smash hit that opened at the Lucille Lortel Theatre in New York City and is now about to open on Broadway. But in this play, Lincoln is not the subject, only the by-product. Everything about the play and its production is meant to center Mary and highlight its star’s feral talent.

Cole Escola (they/them) has created a career-defining production after years of paying their dues on a spectrum of stages from YouTube to Joe’s Pub at New York’s Public Theater. The production of *Oh, Mary!* is seemingly an autobiographical study of sorts of Escola’s own self-perception as a fledgling cabaret talent told through the removed lens of a mock biography of *First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln* in the events leading up to the death of her husband, President Lincoln. The queering of this momentous history is enacted through turning the lens on the First Lady, re-positioning her as an ahistorical antiheroine, and essentially making every character/historical figure homosexual or utterly camp, particularly when revealing their true selves on stage.

Escola's gag is to make Mary's super-objective to be a cabaret star, or rather, to make a comeback to the stage as the star she sees herself as. Escola's artistic license is fully on display in this production as they present a queer revision of history. Mary's boredom with her life, fueled by alcoholism and an inflated ego, are exacerbated by her husband's barely veiled homosexuality. Lincoln is her distant, bewildered husband who we learn early on is more beleaguered by Mary's obsessive fixation on stage stardom, fueled by alcohol, than the War. Abe indulges her by hiring an acting coach in the form of none other than his secret (and jealous) lover John Wilkes Booth. So, everything is in service of Mary. The program conspicuously lists the cast all not by their names but their relation to Mary (i.e. Lincoln is listed as "Mary's husband"). Despite this, the casting is consequential. Both Lincoln and Booth are played by stars of the all-queer helmed film *Fire Island*, another recent entry for queer comedy. Booth convinces Mary that he has secured for her an audition for none other than the fateful production of *Our American Cousin*, the play the president would later be assassinated at while watching from his box seat. But this bit of history is immaterial to the audience as we are following Mary's journey towards stardom or self-destruction.

I have been following Cole Escola and their career since the early days of content creation on social media, the place I consider to be the birthplace of their dexterity as a character actor and comedy writer. Escola's work has always focused on queering culture and historically minded camp sensibilities. After years of digital shorts, pithy tweets, and one-person shows in cabaret spaces, this production feels like the culmination of Escola's ability to fully realize their singular vision.

As Mary Todd Lincoln, Cole Escola sets the same tone for the play from her first line. She desperately cries to Washington's portrait in the Oval Office, "Oh mother! Why did I marry

him?” *Oh, Mary!* is as much concerned with queering sacred American history as it is with queering other deconstructions of history on Broadway, such as Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*. *Oh, Mary!* is a testament to the current generation of mad, queer excellence and those who might find kinship with the idiosyncratic Escola. The play takes the historical subtexts of Mary and Abraham and blows them campily out of proportion, centering the marginalized aspects of their personalities, such as Mary’s mental health or Abraham’s sexuality. By showing these characters navigate those blatantly erroneous identities and making all the wrong choices, the production frees the audience of expectation or the normative urge to conceive that anything could or should be thought of as sacred.

Oh, Mary! might be one of the most offensive comedies to play Off-Broadway, but its subversiveness plays like a labor of love for the idea of the overshadowed and oft-misunderstood First Lady, or any woman that sits at the fulcrum of history. Though the play was delivered with a massive laugh greeting nearly every single line, in a work helmed by Escola there usually comes a moment when an earnest truth is allowed just enough room to peak through and catch the audience off-guard. Diehard fans of Escola will recognize this nuance from the recent digital short film *Our Home Out West* in which Escola plays a Gold Rush-era Madam, in Belle Watling drag—paradigmatic of the Escola oeuvre—and works as a felicitous, subdued counterpart to their high energy Mary Todd. At one point in the film, the brothel owner’s orphaned ward asks her, “Why do people hate you so much?” In contrast to *Oh, Mary!*’s atmosphere of scatological farce comes an eschatological homily on the nature of bigotry. As Cole explains, “I think because life is basically not very fair and so people like to make up their own little rules... they believe that if they follow their rules nothing bad will happen to them. So, when they see

someone who's not following their rules and doing just fine makes them scared that their rules don't really matter and when people get scared, they get mad.”

Oh, Mary! harkens back to past texts of queer import like Charles Busch's *Die, Mommie, Die!* (a drag, psycho-biddy send-up of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*) or Split Britches' *Belle Reprieve* (a drag satire of *A Streetcar Named Desire*). All of them share a similar approach to remixing history and the historiography of Western drama. The play has some structural similarities to Roxie Hart's journey that leads to the final, triumphant stage number that rounds out the story in the denouement of *Chicago*. Yet, when watching the “madcap medley” of *Mary*'s grand finale, the ludicrous joy of watching the play is more akin to seeing “Little” Edie Beale of Grey Gardens finally become the singer and dancer she always said she could be (technical talent be damned!). Little Edie and Mary are both characters steeped in American (presidential) history by association, yet who enjoy basking in their own self-made mythologies.

The production is a celebration of an anachronistic, gonzo-style approach to historical fiction on stage. For one thing, the setting predates what we understand and refer to as cabaret, and the cabaret finale includes music from over one-hundred years later, including the kitschiest hits of the 1970s and 80s, all while twirling and dropping a baton. Though Escola and director Sam Pinkerton are not at all interested in fidelity to dramaturgical accuracy, the production creates a consistent vision of this pivotal moment in American history. That consistency is defined in the program as “the lens of an idiot.” Escola has stated that they “wrote the show from the point of view of the audience, which is our collective third grade understanding of who Mary Todd Lincoln was.” The curls in Mary's wig are not meant to resemble the true style of the period, but are there to accentuate her every manic move. The set, by in-demand designer dots, is meant to resemble the Oval Office, yet evokes *Our American Cousin* pastiche in childlike, broad

strokes with blown-up proportions and spurious designs contrived from a capricious imagination. For example, the books are all clearly not real, except for the one hollowed out and hiding the hooch. The saloon setting in the latter half could be pulled from a shooting gallery in a Western theme park. Did the DC-area have saloons with swinging doors and player pianos at this time? The answer is likely “Who cares?” but more importantly, “Look at Mary go!” Everything acts as a campy gesture to the past—right down to the mock gas footlights. But the gesture is always purposefully pointing in the wrong direction and with a middle finger.

Everything feels very correct in its *incorrectness*—a kind of purposeful queer failure à la J. Jack Halberstam. The show embraces its own failure to grasp historical accuracy and dramaturgical dignity. The camp of *Oh Mary!* lies in its ability to resist the normative desire of biographical texts that prop up the sedate figure of sober greatness that stands behind every great man. There’s an alienation in camp fit for Brecht. But the *Verfremdungseffekt* is most potent for the queer initiated of the audience. We are meant to be alienated from canonical history.

Escola’s success represents a generation of queer alt-comedians with origins from social media platforms like Youtube, Instagram, TikTok, or X (formerly known as Twitter). These queer performers have carved out spaces and followings for themselves that slowly but surely gained them due recognition that they could parlay into the more dominant or traditional spaces of culture. In a time when queer subculture and counterculture are *becoming* the culture, what’s lost along the way may be up for debate. But what is clear from *Oh Mary!* is that it is leading the queer vanguard and delivering mainstream audiences a high priestess of camp.

Philip Brankin is a Visiting Professor of Theater Studies at Emory University and a doctoral student in Theatre & Performance Studies at the University of Georgia where he received an

MFA in Dramatic Media. His research involves queer performance cultures in digital media, focusing on social media platforms as a locus for queer identity formation today. As a practitioner, he has worked as a director, producer, actor, dramaturg, writer, and media designer. A Chicago native, he has worked with Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, Second City, The Piven Theatre Workshop, About Face Theatre, Bailiwick, Chicago Opera Theatre, and Nothing Without a Company, among others.