

Strung-Out Knockout by Mitch Montgomery

Escape From Bellevue and Other Stories reviewed December 16, 2005

"They haven't built a mental institution that can hold me," Christopher John Campion declares, standing atop a series of stepped blocks upstage, like an Olympic marathon runner receiving the gold medal. Campion's defiant, drug-riddled words reverberate off the walls of the Paradise Theater on East Fourth Street. Suddenly, you realize that the walls aren't padded for soundproofing.



Escape From Bellevue and Other Stories takes us into the infamous hospital's psychiatric ward as it follows Campion, the front man for the New York-based band Knockout Drops, through an autobiographical odyssey of drug abuse, rock 'n' roll, and rehabilitation. The play alternates between selections from Knockout Drops' latest album and an off-the-cuff recounting of the highs and lows of Campion's personal battle to get sober.

His life story is familiar to anyone who has seen an episode of VH1's Behind the Music. There is an unwritten and tragic rite of passage for many in the music industry, one that takes an artist to the brink of self-destruction, and Campion is no exception. The difference is that he has courageously decided to relate his story onstage. In four years, Campion managed to land himself in Bellevue three times, and he also became the first person since 1963 to escape.

His presentation skips among the more interesting anecdotes, with Campion playing himself and effectively evoking all the other characters. We learn of his drug problems as he recreates a trip to North Carolina, where, after a wedding, he finds himself in a men's room doing cocaine with a rodeo clown. The fallout from being caught by his girlfriend leads Campion deeper into addiction, alcoholism, and eventually homelessness.

After he announces he will kill himself, Campion's friends have him forcibly taken to Bellevue to detox for the first time. A struggle with the orderlies leads to a Thorazine injection, which leaves him incapacitated. When he awakens, he describes a cuckoo's nest of inmates and counselors worthy of the institution's reputation. After a few days of detox, Campion is released, only to begin the same vicious cycle again.



The second time he finds himself in Bellevue, Campion behaves himself to avoid the Thorazine, and through a happenstance of mistaken identity, he performs his career-marking escape. Though free from Bellevue, Campion remains a prisoner of his own demons until an intervention from his estranged brother sends him to Bellevue for a final time.

Director Horton Foote Jr. deserves a lot of credit for the piece's breakneck momentum. The incorporation of videographer Chris Cassidy's video interludes, which are sometimes more relevant to Campion's sense of humor than his story, adds a stimulating variety to the proceedings. Light designer Harry Rosenblum creates an interesting combination of lighting suitable for both concerts and a dreary institution like Bellevue, using very little equipment.

But the real star of the show is the music of Knockout Drops, which consists of Tom Licameli, guitar/vocals; Phil Mastrangelo, bass/vocals; Vinny Cimino, drums; Paul Giannini, percussion; and Campion, lead vocals. Standout numbers include "Vicious Freaks," a power anthem to burnouts and rejects everywhere, and "Wrong Turn," a quieter meditation on the cyclical nature of recovery and relapse.

It is fitting that Campion attires himself in a striped jacket, which is more appropriate for Barnum & Bailey than a rock concert: he is an able ringleader for this multimedia circus. With charisma and whimsy, he endears and distances himself in relation to the audience, capturing the mystique of an underground rocker without bypassing the heart of his story.

Escape From Bellevue will appeal to more audiences than those it puts off. Those already familiar with Knockout Drops will be pleasantly surprised to find added meaning in the music through Campion's self-deprecating monologues. Theater buffs will discover an ingeniously effective approach, which gives the work an edge lacking in most modern musicals.

Bellevue might not have been able to hold Christopher John Campion, but the Paradise Theater is a suitable lodging for his charisma, his music, and his story of redemption.

ESCAPE FROM BELLEVUE AND OTHER STORIES

Paradise Theater

Category: Experimental
Written by: Christopher John Campion
Directed by: Horton Foote Jr.
Produced by: Knockout Drops & Victoria DeRose
Opens: December 2
Closes: January 14
Running Time: 90 minutes (no intermission)

Theater: Paradise Theater
Address: 64 East 4th Street
New York, NY 10003

BOX OFFICE

Tickets: \$20.00
n/a
Phone: (212) 868-4444

CREDITS

Creative Team

Written by: Christopher John Campion
Directed by: Horton Foote Jr.
Produced by: Knockout Drops and Victoria DeRose
Light Designer: Harry Rosenblum
Music: Knockout Drops
Set Designer: Bret Haines)

Cast/Band:
Lead Vocals: Christopher John Campion
Guitar/Vocals: Tom Licameli
Bass/Vocals: Phil Mastrangelo
Drums: Vinny Cimino
Percussion: Paul Giannini