

Billy Carver and the Children in Mind



nytheatre.com review

[Martin Denton](#) · July 6, 2010

Montserrat Mendez wrote *Billy Carver and The Children in Mind* in three days. There's a back story that explains why: Mendez was set to direct a revival of Alan Ayckbourn's *Woman in Mind* when the rights were suddenly pulled. Armed with cast and crew and concept, he decided to write his own, slightly Ayckbournish comedy, with a title that alludes to the original project and a number of sly references to the playwright (many of them witty digs) peppered throughout the script.

Billy Carver's title also recalls something even more famous than an Alan Ayckbourn play (though I admit I didn't realize it until the play began). The protagonist of Mendez's play is a writer named Joannie Roman Redd, and she is the very wealthy, very successful author of a string of books about a boy named Billy Carver and his many exciting adventures. (Billy Carver = Harry Potter, in case I'm being too subtle.) Billy is a werewolf, it seems; and there's a lot of wolf imagery in the play, which revolves around Joannie and the "pack" surrounding her, a colorful bunch that includes:

- May, her sister, who lives in Joannie's shadow and perhaps likes doing so too much
- Tristan, Joannie's effete personal assistant
- William, Joannie's ex-husband, also a writer
- Christopher, Joannie's fiance, the best midfielder in England
- Priscilla Margot Saunders, a former child movie star now floundering in stage work; an old chum of Joannie's
- Rick, a young man who sneaks into Joannie's house who is somewhat obsessed with the Billy Carver books

Mendez's first act, which reminded me of a Kaufman & Hart screwball comedy more than of an Ayckbourn comedy of manners, introduces us to all of these intriguing people and sets up oodles of situations and relationships amongst them. Joannie, reeling from a bad review, is thinking of killing Billy Carver off in her next book. William wants to write the screenplay for a planned film version of Billy Carver (he has a first draft with him, as a matter of fact, even though Joannie isn't sure at first that she wants to have the film made). Tristan reports that he saw Christopher at a pub last night with his (Christopher's) ex-wife. May wants a man. Priscilla wants to play Virginia Woolf in the Billy Carver film (I'll leave it to you to discover how the famous novelist found her way into the Billy Carver books). Priscilla dredges up a naughty secret from her past involving Joannie. Joannie isn't sure if she should marry Christopher, or get back together with William. Rick, an actor, wants to play Billy Carver in the movies. And he has a wild plan to try to make that happen, one that results in a wild first act curtain that leaves one unable to contemplate for a moment not hurrying back to find out how the playwright plans to tie up all of these loose ends.

To his great credit, Mendez does tie them together; the second act is more introspective than the first, and consequently more reminiscent of the ambiguously melancholic conclusion of a play like, well, *Woman in Mind*. Nonetheless, the play throughout is very funny, its humor rooted in situation, character, and wordplay in equal parts.

The production is probably the most lavish and beautifully realized I've yet seen at Manhattan Theatre Source, whose intimate space can be problematic for some directors and designers. Mendez serves in both capacities here, and the results are stunning: he creates a beautifully appointed English townhouse that feels authentic and lush, brimming with delightful details such as a pattern on the floor tiling that matches the paneling on the bar. Jenny Green's costumes are also lovely: Priscilla wears a succession of over-the-top outfits that remind us of *Absolutely Fabulous*, while May spends the first act in perfectly coordinated dress and sandals. These elements along with the play's overall literary theme and style make *Billy Carver* feel like a rare visitor from a long-gone theatrical era; yet it's a brand-new piece, written almost literally overnight, which is why Montserrat Mendez is a young theatre artist to keep a particular eye on.

The cast of seven is exemplary, too, especially Lauren Roth, who has the showiest role of spoiled movie star Priscilla Saunders: she's perfect as the *monstre sacre*, whether tottering on her high heels unsteadily after too many cocktails or seducing one or another of the guests in Joannie's house. Stuart Williams as Tristan gets some fun moments in the second act, revealing a lifelong dream that I certainly didn't see coming. Aimee Whelan and Jenny D. Green are fine as May and Joannie, while Nathan Willis and Armistead Johnson are both convincing as Joannie's suitors, William and Christopher, respectively. Monroe Robertson rounds out the ensemble as Rick, the one role that feels underwritten; he's charming nevertheless.

Billy Carver and The Children in Mind is a glimmer of wit and glamour in a season that's usually populated by outdoor Shakespeare and stripped-down theatre festivals. I had a great time seeing it.

