

BACKSTAGE

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

NEW YORK CITY THEATRE REVIEWS

Men of Steel

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By David Sheward

You don't have to be a comic-book geek to enjoy *Men of Steel*, Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company's hip satire on superheroes and the existential burden of being all-powerful in a world of ordinary people. Playwright Qui Nguyen takes up questions explored in several popular graphic novels and the current hit NBC series *Heroes*: What would happen if there really were superheroes among us? Would they take unfair advantage of their abilities? Would they save only the nicer parts of town, like Manhattan, and leave the outer boroughs to the mercy of criminals?



Photo by Jim Baldassare

Captain Justice, closely modeled on the recently deceased Captain America, steps over the line and kills two thugs who murdered his wife, ace reporter Helen Harper. Justice's best friend, a Batman clone named Maelstrom, believes heroes have the right to take the law into their own hands and attempts to bust his pal out of the slammer. Nguyen mixes in Liberty Lady, Cap's female sidekick; an invulnerable transvestite; and a pair of Hispanic brothers who copy the moves and costumes of Mexican wrestlers. A gigantic slugfest erupts when these figures clash in a final showdown. Marius Hanford's intricate fight direction is superbly executed by a cast that invests as much in their subtext as in their punches.

Sharon Eisman (Helen) and Melissa Paladino (Liberty Lady) are the most effective at combining a tongue-in-cheek sensibility with a firm conviction in their characters' objectives. Jason Liebman strongly conveys Justice's conflict between superhero idealism and his human weaknesses. Tamar Underwood's Maelstrom is a study in cynicism and self-justification. Noshir Dalal and Paco Tolson are particularly funny as the fumbling brothers: There is one riotous scene in which they try to sell candy to the audience to raise money for firearms. Tom Myers and Jeremy Sarver ably complete this cast of comic-book archetypes.

Men of Steel, directed with a sure hand by Robert Ross Parker, is silly fun with a dark edge.

Presented by Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company at Center Stage, NY, 48 W. 21st St., 4th floor, NYC.

March 18-April 8. Thu.-Sun., 8 p.m.