

SEVEN DAYS [03.28.12]

Star Crossed

Theater review: *Icon*

BY MEGAN JAMES

It's easy to mistake the celebrity train wreck for a phenomenon unique to the paparazzi era. Take, for example, Lindsay Lohan and her alcohol-monitoring anklet. Or Amy Winehouse and the addictions that gradually undid her. But ill-fated stars have been around much longer, as evidenced in Burlington playwright Seth Jarvis' latest play, *Icon*, a one-man show about onetime Hollywood legend Montgomery Clift, the original hot mess.

Clift had everything going for him: fierce talent, a brooding intensity on-screen and a swoon-worthy chiseled face. But he was ravaged by personal demons. Disgusted by a Hollywood that he believed had commodified him, and anguished over his sexuality, Clift turned to drugs and alcohol. His death at 45 in 1966 — 10 years after a horrific car accident disfigured his face — was called the longest suicide in history.

Like many people under a certain age, I'd never heard of Montgomery Clift, so in preparation for *Icon*, I rented two of the four films for which he snagged Oscar nominations, *A Place in the Sun* and *From Here to Eternity*. It wasn't entirely necessary — Jarvis' younger brother, Nathan, is captivating onstage as Clift, whether or not you get all the references.

On-screen, Clift displays a powerful emotional restraint. Jarvis' Clift is utterly unrestrained. He has all the tragic brooding of on-screen Clift, as well as the charm — but, well, he's drunk. And doped up on pills. Imagine the classic "strong, silent type" turned chattier, gayer and unself-consciously confessional.

It's clear before the play even begins that Clift has hit rock bottom. The small stage at Off Center for the Dramatic Arts has been transformed into a one-room apartment in disarray. The focal point is an unkempt bar littered with decanters, highballs and at least one bottle of pills. Beside it, a full-length mirror is flipped over to face the back wall, and someone is buried under the covers of a single bed. Next to it on a table is a small portrait of a gleaming Elizabeth Taylor. On the floor, another bottle of pills.

Over it all, Frank Sinatra croons.

A moment after the lights dim, Jarvis emerges from the pile of blankets as Montgomery Clift, clad in a red silk robe, his head wrapped in bandages and his face bruised and swollen. "My God, you're an ugly audience," he says dryly. "I doubt you even exist. Hand me my drink, will you?"



Nathan Jarvis
Photo by Matthew Thorsen

Over the next hour and change, Jarvis engages the audience in a boozy lament that is alternately silly and devastating. We quickly discover it's been a few weeks since "the accident." In 1956, Clift drove into a tree after leaving a party at Taylor's. When they pulled him from the wreckage, he wasn't breathing. It was Taylor, whom he calls "Bessie Mae," who reached into his throat to remove the two teeth lodged there.

At the start of the play, Clift knows his face is damaged but hasn't yet looked in the mirror. He wishes the crash had killed him. "I have no great love for this world, and I believe the feeling is mutual," he says.

It sounds depressing, and it would be unbearable if Jarvis weren't so endearing. Sure, he does a lot of whining and moaning. But some of his complaints are so pathetic they're funny, such as his admission that he was rejected from the army because of colitis. "Rejected for diarrhea," he says matter-of-factly. "How humiliating is that?" He waits a beat, then starts scratching his body. "I'm also itchy," he says.

Jarvis' timing is impeccable. In one segment, bemoaning the shallowness of Hollywood, he fantasizes about returning to the stage to play Hamlet. He launches into the Dane's first soliloquy:

"How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,

Seem to me all the uses of this world!

Fie on't! Ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden,

That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature

Possess it merely. That it should come to this!"

Jarvis looks at the audience, and the spell is broken. "This is ridiculous!" he says and flops on the bed, defeated. A second later he asks, with Shakespearean gravitas, "What, sweet liquor, have you abandoned me, too?"

His glass is right beside him. "Oh," he says when he notices, and starts drinking again.

In the program, director Chris Caswell notes that *Icon* is "a play about the nature of biography." And that's partly what makes it so relatable — who among us hasn't imagined how we will be remembered after we're gone? Clift compares himself to James Dean, who was killed in a horrific car accident of his own, a promising young actor snuffed out in spectacular fashion.

Clift's accident, he says, "didn't become tragic until they learned I'd survived." Imagining what people will say about the last 10 years of his life, he says, "All he ever did after the accident was keep on dying."

Which is, for the most part, precisely what happened.

There's one distraction in this otherwise powerful show: Throughout his monologue, Jarvis periodically sits on the edge of the set in a director's chair behind a red velvet rope. His tone of voice changes slightly — is he being interviewed by an imaginary biographer? Holding a fantasy press conference? It's unclear why he's interrupting

the intimate confessional, except perhaps to remind us that Clift wasn't always strung out; that he was once a big-time celebrity who warranted a velvet rope.

There are some flabby moments in the storytelling, but Jarvis cuts through them with a refreshing self-awareness. Just when you almost can't take any more of his moaning, he says, "Are you sick of me yet? As sick of me as I am?"

Hardly. After seeing *Icon*, I watched *From Here to Eternity* and found myself wishing that the expressive Jarvis, not the stoic Clift, were playing the role of the doomed soldier Robert E. Lee Prewitt. Clift, who in *Icon* accuses Hollywood of stripping the soul from his movies, might have agreed that theater could convey his spark in a way those films couldn't. "Theater is a vital art," Jarvis tells us onstage. "Vital because it allows us to commune with the dead."