

L I T T L E C A E S A R

By W.R. Burnett

Adaptation by Michael Miner &
Thomas Riccio

Directed by Thomas Riccio

The Organic Theater

June 20 - July 31

Rico, a young member of Sam Vettori's gang on the South Side of Chicago, is short, quick with a gun, and the cruellest gangster in town. When Rico kills a plainclothes policeman while the gang is holding up a hotel, Sam gets mad because Big Boy (a city official who helps to hush up cases against the gang) can fix anything but murder, especially a police officer's murder. Rico proceeds to take control of Sam's gang and earns the support of Big Boy. For a while, Rico dominates the organized crime in Chicago, profiting both from hold-ups and underground distilleries. But a series of "weak links" in his chain of supporters helps Flaherty, a dogged Irish policeman, to run the Little Caesar out of town and across several states. Flaherty finally machine-guns him down in the streets of Toledo, Ohio, Rico's hometown. "Ain't that a break!"

The story is reportedly a true account of factual events first put in a novel by W.R. Burnett, and then fashioned into a play by Thomas Riccio and Michael Miner.

Why did Tom Riccio, the artistic director of the Organic Theater Company choose to produce and direct this play? The exploration of such themes as religion, the mafia and mother-son relations constitutes only a small part of his attraction. Riccio's real interest lay, it seems, not in the war between "We Serve and Protect" and "Cosa Nostra", but in the war between style and story. It is a justifiable choice: he could only show the first war on stage but he could participate directly in the second one. The result is that audiences can go to the Organic's production of *Little Caesar* and appreciate a new step in the development of narrative in theatre.

The classical novel developed two kinds of plots. In one, something goes wrong in the beginning, additional obstacles arise on the way to solving the problem, and the story ends when all is more or less back to normal. The other kind of plot recounts a person's life or some other chain of events in roughly chronological order and ends with the individual's death (or when the author feels s/he has written enough.) Both of these plot forms have been subverted, stretched, modified and discarded more times and in more ways than could be mentioned here. Interestingly, film productions have played a major part in subverting the narrative.

For example, Hollywood was responsible for the replacement of story by style in the film "Cabaret". In that early '70's

screen version of a Broadway musical, the plot was de-emphasized to the point of becoming a series of petty, illustrative scenes while the style and fashion of pre-WW2 Germany decadence were exploited to the point of becoming the main subject of the film. This technique of replacing plot for style has often been practiced in film, painting and performance art in the last decade and a half; these works are easy to distinguish by their resemblance to runway fashion shows and fashion photography.

But never, to my knowledge, was style used as an active means to deconstruct plot. In *Little Caesar* it happens for the first time. Here style is used as an active force to arrest the movement of this (biographical) plot and to break it up into palatable, digestible morsels of scenes bordering on tableaux, reminiscent of silent films. Style becomes the digestive juice that breaks down the story into immobile, sharp, elegant bits we can savor and assimilate. The resulting show is decorative, elegant, and civilized. It is only natural that Tom Riccio should be the director to take this important step: he has long been a believer in style-dominated theatre based on clearly readable movement going back to Commedia del Arte.

As often happens when a new method is introduced in theatre, it raises a new acting problem: how does one act naturally in a stylized performance? Clearly, it may take more than one pro-

duction to resolve this issue. A new method of actor training may become necessary and we should be grateful to Riccio's production for bringing this need so clearly into the foreground.

Relative to the acting, it is obvious that the strictness of style provides a "support level" that compensates for the occasional unevenness of individual performances. At times, when a cast member seems not to know what s/he is doing, the very rigidity of the stylized stance helps conceal their uncertainty. Thus, style preserves the integrity of the process and provides a framework to be filled by the actors gradually, as their skill grows. In a way, this is a director's dream. Poor acting is concealed, leaving room for good acting to shine through when it happens.

However, this is not to suggest that the acting in *Little Caesar* is poor. A. Cesaretti (whose name means "little caesar" in Italian) gives a very strong performance as Rico. He is positively brilliant in the scene in which he dresses while singing an Italian aria along with a record. During this scene, a powerful relationship is created between Rico's voice and the voice on the record. It suggests a comparison between the two lifestyles implied in the two voices and between the two sides of the human soul: murderer and singer. The power of theatre shines through this moment in which Cesaretti, while playing a very unattractive character, stirs our love and compassion for a brief time. S.B. Turner is also very good as Otero, while D. Rommel creates an interesting portrait of Flaherty, and C. Sanz is very competent as Joe, the dancer. B. Bontumasi delights us throughout the play with a whole string of lively characters, some hard to forget. J. Kim and C. Martineau make clumsy-yet-elegant molls.

In addition to stylized acting, the properties created by Chicago performance artist Brendan de Vallance contribute strongly to the grotesque atmosphere of the world in this play. Guns, newspapers, playing cards and automobiles are flat, foldable cardboard ponies, which are usually very large. Watching gangsters play huge cards or Rico comb his hair with a comb the size of his leg not only makes people look small, but also keeps reminding us that we are watching style, not story. The set by G. Mowery is not only attractive it also helps the actors' performances: the stage is raked at such an extreme angle that everyone has to find an expressive way of walking just to stay upright. The several acting areas (upstairs, downstairs, on the ladder and shadow theatre) are powerful tools, used perhaps a little too rigidly. The use of slide projections and neon signs is very effective and contributes to the feeling of the twenties in Chicago. Costumes by M. Komorowska are surprisingly realistic. They work to introduce believability into a situation that has been stretched so tightly; it could otherwise snap the audience's suspension of disbelief. The lighting design by J. Card is interesting at times, but often lacks flexibility. Dances and much other movement in the play were very sensitively choreographed by E. Ruf. She and the prop master de Vallance have contributed a great deal to the success of this provocative production.

—MICHAEL WASSERMAN

