

## THE FIST THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE

### INKY

Written by Rinne Groff  
Directed by Emma Griffin  
Review by Eric Hayward

Muhammad Ali introduced a form of theater into the sport of professional boxing, transforming the ring through violently poetic "monologues" into a kind of stage upon which he created the legend of himself. *Inky* reverses this process. When its main character—the Ali-obsessed nanny of a professional Manhattan couple—delivers these same monologues, the stage is transformed into a sort of boxing ring, spotlighting the brutal power struggle played out within a downwardly-mobile American family.

The story begins when Inky, a woman from an unnamed country, is hired to nanny for would-be yuppies Clay and Barbara, played by Mahlon Stewart and Maria Porter. Hoping to maintain an upper middle-class lifestyle and move to a bigger apartment, Barbara shows a sexualized desire for money that her husband just isn't making. The drama unfolds as we discover that Inky's desire to remake herself in the likeness of

Mohammed Ali. After daughter Allison is mugged while selling Girl Scout cookies, Inky begins accompanying her door-to-door. Soon, Allison has learned how to hit, is expelled from the Scouts for not turning in her profits, and Inky is returning home with bloody knuckles and pockets full of bills and change.

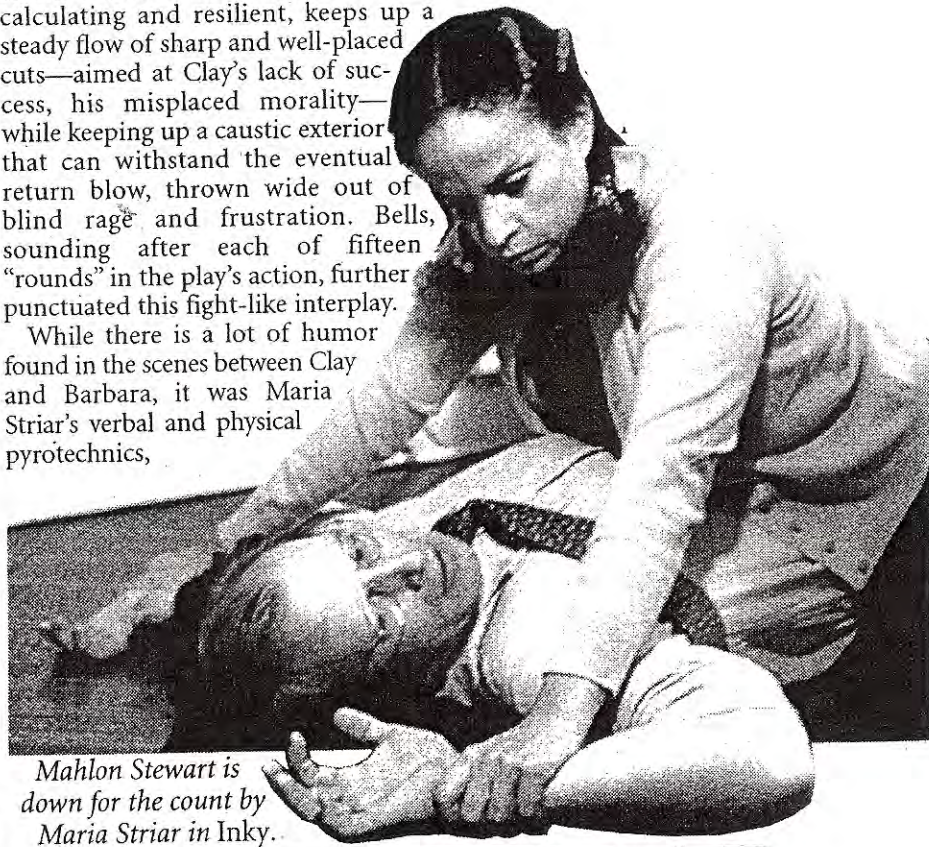
Don't assume, though, that this is just another one of those evil nanny stories. Through the sanctioned sport of boxing, violence has been presented to Inky as a way to protect herself and the ones she loves. Within this play "right" and "wrong" can be as elusive as a dexterous opponent, and intention seems to assert itself over all else.

Speaking of dexterity, in both their movement and speech Mahlon Stewart and Maria Porter carried the play's subtle parallel between boxing and the way prolonged non-communication can erupt into argument. At first slowly dancing around each other, feigning with under the breath, almost-jabs that trail off into silence, they eventually strike. Barbara, being decidedly more calculating and resilient, keeps up a steady flow of sharp and well-placed cuts—aimed at Clay's lack of success, his misplaced morality—while keeping up a caustic exterior that can withstand the eventual return blow, thrown wide out of blind rage and frustration. Bells, sounding after each of fifteen "rounds" in the play's action, further punctuated this fight-like interplay.

While there is a lot of humor found in the scenes between Clay and Barbara, it was Maria Striar's verbal and physical pyrotechnics,

her quick steps back and forth between wholly distinct aspects of character, that allowed this play to fully realize its status as a comic drama. On the butterfly-side is Inky, the apparently naïve and diminutive girl whose foreign pronunciation and delivery would sound authentic to any ignorant or not-so-ignorant American. She develops a truly comedic persona whose humor stems from much more than just an amusing accent. Striar stepped into the Ali monologues adeptly, at once portraying Inky and Inky's best imitation of Mohammed Ali, the latter betrayed between shadow jabs and sprays of spit by the nanny's irrepressible character.

*Inky* is definitely worth seeing. For black box aficionados, I've never seen a set that better leverages the intimacy of smaller space. In the highly paraphrased words of Muhammad Ali: "You tell this to your camera, your newspaper, your TV man, your radio man. You tell this to the world... (*Inky* is) the greatest."



Mahlon Stewart is down for the count by Maria Striar in *Inky*.

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# VOICE

## THEATER

Groff's Domestic Affairs;

### ALI IN THE FAMILY

BY FRANCINE RUSSO

#### INKY

By Rinne Groff  
Altered Stages  
212 West 29th Street 212-802-8007

Originality—it's rare. But you can experience the pleasurable sharp intake of breath it brings by seeing Rinne Groff's *Inky* and the Talking Band's *Black Milk Quartet*.

*Inky* is a neat little noir comedy full of deft twists, acerbic quips, and a lunge at your guts. It juxtaposes a clichéd Upper East Side yuppie couple against their new nanny, Inky—a strange young woman from an unspecified Eastern European country who secretly idolizes Muhammad Ali, reciting his rhymes and boxing like a champ.

Inky is hired into a tense household to care for Barbara and Clay's new baby boy and Barbara's daughter Allie. Clay has mysterious money pressures. Barbara is contemptuous—of Clay, mothering, and nearly everything else.

Inky insinuates herself into the heart of the family, and develops fierce loyalties. She's a survivor, with a genius for listening. She teaches Barbara to hear and interpret the sound of the baby's breathing. She intuits hidden vibrations between the couple and pieces together Clay's business secrets. When bruises appear on little Allie, Barbara and Clay learn that Inky has been teaching her boxing. Soon the tensions in the household explode into physical combat, and shocking revelations about Inky's past illuminate the dark underside of the couple's oh-so-correct facade.

Emma Griffin directs pungently, with style. The scenes are short and pointed, punctuated by fight-ring bells. The verbal byplay is snappily timed, and the physicality is visceral. Louisa Thompson's luxurious all-white set is the perfect ironic statement on the couple's deeply stained psyches.

Groff's women are compelling. Maria Porter delivers witheringly funny lines as Barbara, believably selfish, brittle, and vulnerable. Though a bit jejune, Mahlon Stewart's Clay is nicely snaky. Maria Striar's Inky, however, is a scream: mangling her English, jabbing at the air with her fists, whooping "I am da king!" She also projects a furtive anxiety and purposeful vigilance that hint at her escape from the abyss. You might wish you knew a bit more about these characters, but Groff has written according to Barbara's favorite gambit, trailing off a suggestive thought with "Dot, dot, dot." The meanings are in the interstices of this terse, highly charged psychodrama.

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Feb 4, 2000

Continued from

THE MARGIN

By: Gusi Gram

Archive

Busy is not the word for playwright and performer Rinne Groff. Her play *Inky* just opened at Altered Stages, she is about to leave on a national tour with Elevator Repair Service, the performance group she co-founded, and in April, Target Margin Theater will produce her newest play, *The Five Hysterical Girls Theorem*. Not bad for someone who just finished graduate school in May.

**INKY**

Groff, a charming and eloquent Florida native fresh out of the graduate dramatic writing program at NYU, is no stranger to Off-Off Broadway. She moved to New York after she graduated from Yale in 1991 to pursue a career as an actress. Shortly afterwards, she began collaborating with John Collins and some other Yale alums, and Elevator Repair Service was born.

ERS, as they are commonly known, use text, movement and sound in a completely original way to explore everything from documentary filmmaking to Andy Kaufman. With titles like *Marx Brothers on Horseback Salad*, *Spine Check*, *Shut Up I Tell You*, and their latest touring production, *Total Fictional Lie*, ERS's particular brand of absurdist humor has made them unlikely critical darlings. They regularly have sold-out performances in downtown New York venues and have traveled to festivals in Germany, Austria, Amsterdam, Switzerland, and most recently, Slovenia. Groff seems somewhat amazed by the group's success. "I remember I sat next to John Collins at graduation and we started talking about how we were both moving to New York and that we should get together and work on something," she recalls. "I never dreamt it would become this big thing. I just find the work we do so satisfying."

The more traditional world of acting proved less satisfying to Groff. She paid her dues and did some regional theater work, but no longer found acting as fulfilling as it had been to her. After a little soul searching and two months in India studying yoga, she decided she wanted to write plays. She applied to graduate school because she felt like she needed structure, explaining, "In the past I started things, but never finished them. I knew graduate school would force me to finish things."

And finish things she did. Theatergoers can see some of the fruits of Groff's labors at Altered Stages through February 12. Clubbed Thumb, an up-and-coming theater company and a co-producer of the much-touted Mac Wellman festival, is producing *Inky*, the weird and moving tale of a nanny (named Inky), of unknown Eastern European descent, who brings her love of Mohammed Ali and boxing to an unsuspecting yuppie family. Nothing is the same after *Inky*'s arrival, when members of the family find themselves fighting in new and unsuspected ways.



Maria Striar, one of the artistic directors of Clubbed Thumb and the star of *Inky*, was drawn to the play's intelligence. "We like to produce plays that never underestimate how smart our audience is," Striar explained. "We look for plays that are bright and brave and that have a certain humor. *Inky* is all of those things. It really leapt off the page."

Striar leaps off the stage in her inspired performance as *Inky*. Groff's quirky writing and Striar's disciplined and meticulous performance create a remarkable and unpredictable character.

The inspiration for *Inky* comes from an unlikely source—the actual words of the prize fighter Mohammed Ali. Groff was given a book containing interviews with Ali, and found that "the way he used words was amazing. I'm really interested as a writer in the times people speak in poetic ways," says Groff. "I like exploring what brings out non-pedestrian language in someone." There is certainly nothing pedestrian about the language in *Inky*. The play crackles and pops and, in the words of Ali himself, "floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee."

Language is also at the center of Groff's next play, *The Five Hysterical Girls Theorem*, which was commissioned by David Herskovits for Target Margin Theater and will open April 19 at the Connelly Center. Target Margin, an Obie Award-winning theater group, is best known for its re-interpretations of Shakespeare and popular and forgotten classics, but is devoting its 1999-2000 season to new plays. In choosing the plays he wanted to produce Herskovits looked for "texts that stretch beyond the familiar, that seek to incarnate imaginary worlds, that will spark the mind and free the spirit."

Groff's next play sounds like it just might do all that. *The Five Hysterical Girls Theorem* is set in 1913 and is about a famous mathematician who travels with his family to a seaside resort, where a startling revelation is about to be presented to an illustrious group of number theorists. In the last few years Groff has become more and more interested in mathematicians and scientists. "I'm very intrigued by the way mathematicians speak about their work. They talk about writing a beautiful proof, a concise proof, an elegant proof. For some reason I find that very moving."

And how does it feel to be performing on tour while her plays are being performed in New York? "Lucky. I feel lucky that I have had these long and fruitful relationships with a lot of really talented people," says Groff, "and that they continue to take an interest in my work."

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## SUMMERWORKS 2000

Summertime in New York offers myriad delights, and ranking right up there with Central Park concerts and rooftop BBQs (though below the perfection of Mr. Frostee cherry-dip cones) is Clubbed Thumb's annual Summerworks series. Past installments have proffered swell scripts and fine acting, and there should more of the same. This season's flagship production, *Medea Eats*, playwright Adam Bock details a dinner party most unpalatable. **Ohio Theatre**, 66 Wooster, 802-8007, opens Thu, through 6/24. (Soloski) ¢



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### Medea Eats



*A wickedly funny culinary classic.*

Ebola got you down? Think S.C. Johnson is behind West Nile virus? Then see *Medea Eats*, one of three new plays featured in Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks 2000 festival. San Francisco playwright Adam Bock's examination of desire, repression, and corporate treachery will leave you chilled even in a New York heat wave.

Nominally, *Medea Eats* is about a blindly adulatory woman, Medea (Meg MacCary), and her husband, King (Mather Zickel), a bad, bad man who philanders, sacrifices friends for his own gain, and abuses hapless servants. The action revolves around a dinner party, an AIDS-inspired plague, and big-business conspiracy.

Bock has taken a liberal view of the original Greek myth of a woman who acts the aggressor against others, however heinous the result. In *Medea Eats*, that dynamic collapses to "man versus himself," with each character ping-ponging between private, sometimes unrecognized, desires and a perceived public self. Director Pam MacKinnon has done a good job of staging the physicality with which these battles often manifest themselves, from the autistic outbursts of Medea to the stammering speech of well-behaved Eileen (Kimberly Ross) and the skittish swagger of lecherous Dr. Cut (Gary Brownlee).

The cast is uniformly strong, with a standout performance from John Wellmann, whose portrayal of Tourette's syndrome sufferer Jack Shit could have been bathetic but instead is a foul-mouthed, arm-punching, Michael-Stipe-mocking jewel.

The play raises interesting issues -- for example, is apathy as poisonous as attack? -- but never quite gets around to answering them. The final scene is visually interesting but intellectually disappointing, bringing a pat finish to what is still a play well worth seeing. -- *Regina Kwon*

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**DOWNWINDERS** I've never seen  
a Clubbed Thumb production  
I haven't thoroughly enjoyed,  
and their latest should be no  
exception. In *Downwinders*,  
playwright Erin Courtney fuses  
a tale of atomic tests with the  
filming of a Genghis Khan epic  
(starring John Wayne!). Already  
intriguing when viewed in  
workshop two summers ago,  
the play should have exploded  
into its own buy now. Maria  
Striar directs. **Walkerspace**, 46  
Walker, 802-8007, through  
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**NOVEMBER 14, 2000 VOICE CHOICES 107**