The Roast, by Jerry Belson and Gary Marshall. Starring Rob Reiner, Peter Boyle, and Bill Macy; Directed by Carl Reiner. Appearing at the Student Theatre until April 22.

The Roast is probably going to be one of Broadway's big spring/summer draws this year. It has all the elements for popular success: well-known actors, quick comedy, a script that doesn't need too much thought to digest, and an interesting format.

The basic premise of the play is a roast, that free-for-all style of comedy. Not a roast in the Dean Martin television style, but an all out ribald stag roast. Like one of the featured guests says about his invitation to roast the Muppets on television: "I go to a roast to insult my friends... How can I insult a bag of cloth?"

The roast is comedian Phil Alexander (Peter Boyle), the Humanitarian of the Decade. He helps crippled children, builds hospitals, entertains the troops, and supports his less fortunate brother — all in the name of fame. In other words, he is a Class A bastard and we're all waiting for him to get his.

The most likely person to shaft the self-styled hero is Danny Keller, played by Rob Reiner — or at least, Reiner's version of the role. Keller is the no-holds-barred, style where the comedians will use their hottest material (like the imitation of two queer elephants giving each other a blowjob). The implication is also that the men are free to let all their bad feeling for one another pour out, as well, without fear of retribution.

The second act is much better than the first. The scene is the actual roast, performed directly for the audience. Each comedian gets his chance to "do" Alexander. The routines themselves are funny, but the real action occurs in a set of closeups of individual pairs of people, specifically Danny and Phil with the others. Suspense is heightened as we see Danny growing increasingly nervous as his resolve to destroy Alexander is eaten away. We see Phil becoming equally worried as he wonders what Danny will say.

The close-ups are achieved by an interesting effect. Every few minutes the lights dim, and a spotlight highlights two of the actors. The quick shift of attention keeps the audience on its toes and improves the plot's development immeasurably. The exterior routines are not without meaning, either. Each one mentions some facet of the Alexander/Keller relationship. The additional information makes us realize how difficult Danny's decision is.

Rob Reiner does an excellent job in the lead. When he walks on, he looks like a mental institute outpatient. He holds up the character without saying a word. He shakes imperceptibly; he mangles a styrofoam coffee cup. Danny Keller was at one time an extremely controversial comedian known for his bad taste topics (Kennedy campaign promise, a blouse in every president). Reiner lets us see the man beneath the controversy. He's scared, angry, and very hurt by his old friend's treatment.

The comedians are copies of real life joke men. Art Carney, Groucho Marx, Richard Pryor, and others are represented by competent characterizations. Part of the fun in the first act is guessing who each man is supposed to be. But the best performances are done by Amy Freeman as Sonny Silver, a crusty old New Yorker, Bill Macy as Gus Mizzy, a failing nightclubber, and Antonia Fargas as B. B. Gum, a sally black comedian. The tempo of The Roast is quick, the lines are funny, the actors are familiar, and the plot doesn't require mental gymnastics to interpret. The play is well worth seeing, and you should see it soon. Once it hits Broadway next month the prices will double.

Michael Tavris

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