

Wrong Turn at Lungfish

by Garry Marshall & Lowell Gan, directed by Garry Marshall

[Falcon Theatre](#)

Runs 10/29/2004 - 11/14/2004

If Garry Marshall has proven anything in his long, illustrious career, it's that he knows how to craft a story and create compelling characters. So it's not so surprising that he has done so again with **Wrong Turn at Lungfish**. What is surprising is that this is the first time he has paired up on stage with his number one movie fave, Hector Elizondo, who it seems has appeared in every one of Mr. Marshall's 14 films.

Peter Ravenswaal (Elizondo) is an almost blind patient who has just learned that the cause of his blindness will soon be the cause of his death. We quickly learn he is one of those grumpy, unsympathetic types of terminal patient who has his student nurse (Joanna Canton) at her wit's end. He is so miserable, in fact that the reason he has a student nurse, and not a full-fledge one is that no one else will put up with him. Indeed, no one comes to see him at all, except for Anita Merendino (Ana Ortiz) a ditzy, nasal, deeply-accented volunteer reader who refuses to go away, no matter what verbal barbs he showers upon her. In spite of himself, this curmudgeon fails to prevent the young woman from wiggling into his heart. The story is complicated when she asks for money to save Dominic de Caesar (Jason Gendrick), her two bit punk boyfriend whose makes a living beating up people. He's headed nowhere and has to leave town, and Anita is giddily delighted (in a battered-wife-syndrome sort of way) to go with him. When his fists send her to the hospital (not the first beating, apparently), Peter wants to take on the punk himself, even though she wants to climb out after him through the hospital window.

Lungfish is a Pigmaleon-like story set in a hospital room, in which the older, more educated character is meant to teach the ignorant-yet-lovely younger character a thing or two about life. Perhaps even save her from herself. Of course he does; and as is the nature of this type of story, it is perhaps what he learns from her that is the greater lesson. Thrown in for good measure are philosophical discussions about the meaning of life, and the contemplation of it at the moment of death. While the story itself does not offer many surprises, the dialogue is at times extremely clever, and at times very profound. The one twist - which I imagine is meant to be a shocker in a kick-in-the-stomach sort of way - fails to achieve its potential because we never view the transformation in Anita, from con artist to true friend. Ms. Ortiz is so adorable and genuine from the get-go, that we never question her motives. Thus, when Dominic forces her to confess to Peter, she is not anywhere near as contrite or mortified at herself as she should have been. It also does not help that Peter barely flinches. Sure, there's a little disappointment, but hardly what you'd expect from someone who's just been told their hero is a sham.

Marshall's writing has met its match in his choice of actors. Elizondo is the quintessential choice for a crusty exterior/marshmallow interior sort of man (*Chicago Hope* and *Pretty Woman* come to mind), and though he delivers an emotionally rich and sassy performance, his technical work as a blind man was spotty at best. Ortiz

manages to convey a gentle intelligence through the thick New York accent and uncultured vocabulary, although I am certain that this talented actress could have easily conveyed a more complex and disturbing character if given the chance. Gendrick's Dominic, on the other hand, was a caricature of a punk. Part buffoon, part pretty boy, he was straight from central casting. Canton's nurse succeeded in overcoming what could otherwise have been a one-note character, filling her brief appearances with a complex emotional life, and Keith E. Mitchell's hospital room was surely inspired by one of Ian Shrader's *W* Hotels.