

British Theatre Guide

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The Hudsucker Proxy

Joel and Ethan Coen (adapted by Simon Dormandy)

Nuffield Theatre, Liverpool Playhouse and Complicite

Liverpool Playhouse

5–27 June 2015

Time is money, so goes the old adage. As well as rather deftly summarising the rise of 20th century US capitalism, it would also be a rather apt sub title for Simon Dormandy's stage adaptation of the Coen brothers' *The Hudsucker Proxy*. In the wake of corporate scandal upon corporate scandal, this is nothing if not a timely production.

From the moment we are plunged into the frenetic activity of the mail room of Hudsucker Industries, a corporate can of worms unfolds. On the one hand, *The Hudsucker Proxy* is a celebration of the American dream, while on the other hand it's a cautionary anti-capitalist parable. Greed can be both good and bad, but more often than not it's bad.

Liverpool Playhouse's version rightly emphasises the sheer scale of the Coens' original vision.

From the bowels of the mail room to the dizzying heights of the 44th floor boardroom, this production is indeed all about scaling great heights.

Elevator operator Buzz—played with wise-cracking fizzles by Tim Lewis—is forever engaged taking incumbents up and down the Hudsucker skyscraper as individual fortunes, like the company's stock value, ebb and flow.

Some ingenious staging also helps to create a constant state of flux. Dick Bird's set built around sliding Bakelite panels, grotesquely large clocks and Orwellian slogan (The future is now!) create a landscape that, while undeniably infused with endeavour and optimism, seems somehow hollow, brittle even.

Norville Barnes (Joseph Timms) is the boy from nowhere freshly arrived in metropolis and ready to make his fortune. An innocent abroad, the audience root for Norville through thick and even through thin, when success momentarily goes to his head. Timms plays the role with just about the right amount of Clark Kent gullibility and likeability.

CEO and big cheese Sidney Mussburger (Simon Dormandy) is a menacing, cigar-puffing Robert Maxwell incarnation, a man for whom the bottom line is everything. For Hudsucker industries is capitalism without compassion.

Indeed, the whole ensemble attack this piece with all the raw energy and optimism that characterised post-war America. Performances and direction are always snappy—they have to be—for 1950s America was the type of place in which to stand still was to go backwards. The cynicism of the hacks is matched only by the sassiness of the dames.

This is a boardroom of pure Darwinism, where the strong literally rise to the top and the weak fall to the bottom. It's a place where the American dream can happen, but it's also a place where dreams

can just as easily turn sour.

What goes up, inevitably, must also come down. Falls at Hudsucker tend to be from great heights, with those doing the falling usually ending up splattered over the sidewalk. Cue some amusing touches of stagecraft.

A box office flop upon its cinematic release, The Coen brothers' homage to Hollywood presents a view of capitalism with far from rosy undertones. It's not entirely a romance nor is it entirely a comedy, which may go some way to explaining—irony of ironies—its commercial failure. For the movie-going public, perhaps there's just a little too much ambiguity on offer and not enough certitude.

In its current theatrical guise, however, *The Hudsucker Proxy* simply bowls along. Creative staging, vitality and just the sheer charm of theatre all help to ensure that the stage version hits the heights.

Sometimes, only the theatre will do.

Reviewer: [David Sedgwick](#)