

REVIEW

Mid-life 'Lover's' revival begets hilarity

BY PETER FILICHA
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

One of Neil Simon's funniest —

yet strangely neglected — plays is getting a marvelous revival at the African Globe TheatreWorks of

Newark.

It's "The Last of the Red-Hot Lovers," Simon's 1969 smash about

Barney Cashman, a restaurateur who suddenly finds that he's 47 and not getting any younger. He still loves Thelma, his wife of 23 years, but given that she was his high school sweetheart and the only woman he's ever known intimately, he can't help wondering what he's missed along the way.

So Barney brings Elaine Nazario, one of his customers, to his mother's apartment while she's out working at Mount Sinai. And a cool customer she is. He wants to get to know her, while she just wants to know where the bed is.

When Linda Lavin played Elaine in the original Broadway production, she was a no-holds-barred shrew. Here, Michele Rae smartly plays her as a vixen, with a glint in her eye to offset her flinty smile.

Jeff Lambert has the role that Simon wrote for the late James Coco, and while he isn't as rotund as his predecessor — deflating a few lines that address his weight — he's just as funny. His Barney tries to be carefree, barking out hollow laughter and giving a would-be joyous clap of his hands. But soon those hands are nervously scratching the back of his neck. He's so jittery that no matter where he sits on the couch, he seems about to fall off it.

Lambert makes the audience roar when he says at the end of his debacle with Elaine, "I'll never, ever do that again" — for the crowd knows that indeed he will. Good thing, too, for there are two more riotous episodes to go.

Nine months after Elaine, Barney tries to initiate another affair, now with a twentysomething actress he meets in the park. This time, Bobbi's the talker while he's the one anxious to proceed.

NEW JERSEY STAGE

The Last of the Red-Hot Lovers

Where: African Globe TheatreWorks, Symphony Hall Second Space, 1020 Broad St., Newark

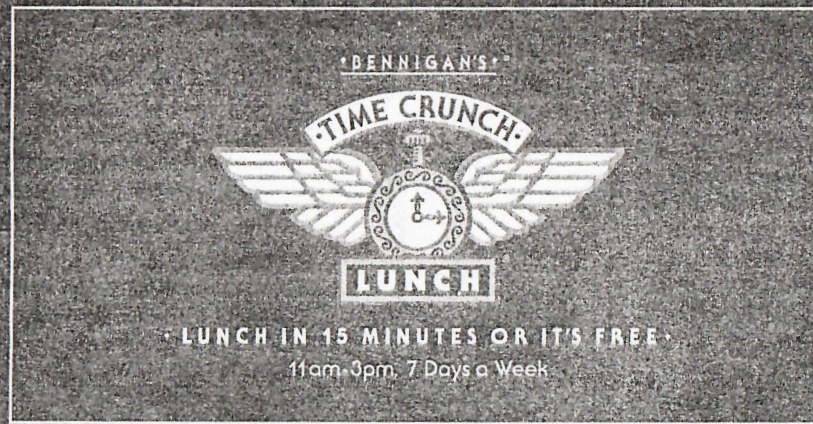
When: Through April 28. Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 3 p.m.

How much: \$10 for Fridays, \$20 other performances. Call (973) 624-1584 or visit www.africanglobe.com.

While Bobbi claims that the August day has made her "goofy from the heat," Deidre Da Silva proves she'd be goofy in the dead of winter, with a performance that's chatty and hilarious, yet fetchingly seductive.

Finally, there's Jeanette Fisher, the wife of Barney's good friend. She turns out to be more nervous than Barney ever was — at least for a while. But then comes Jeanette's deluge of bitterness. "Name me three people who are kind, gentle and decent," she snarls. "What makes life worth getting up for?" Tanya Turner portrays Jeanette as a complicated woman in tears without missing any of the humor.

Director Dawn Wilczynski stages "Red-Hot Lovers" with the speed of a commercial comedy, but extracts the bittersweet juice from each scene. She keeps the action in 1969, so there's some talk about \$1.50 cab rides and producer David Merrick. But one thing hasn't changed: Anyone who's considering having an affair should see "The Last of the Red-Hot Lovers" before making that first date.



"Here's to your lunch
actually feeling like an hour."

— Irish Toast

BENNIGAN'S
GRILL & TAVERN®
Sláinte

65 U.S. Highway 1, Metuchen

405 N. Midland Ave., Saddle Brook