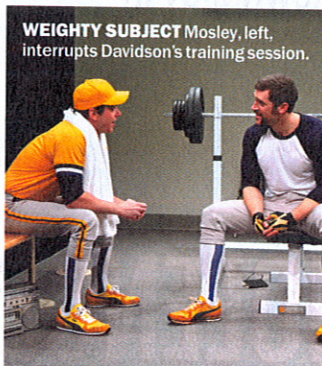


Back Back Back

★★★★★

Manhattan Theatre Club (see Off Broadway). By Itamar Moses. Dir. Daniel Aukin. With ensemble cast. 1hr 35mins. No intermission.



WEIGHTY SUBJECT Mosley, left, interrupts Davidson's training session.

No one plays king of the hill more craftily than Itamar Moses, who has made jockeying for position among high-performing males the animating subject of his best plays so far, *Bach at Leipzig* and *The Four of Us*. Maybe that's why *Back Back Back*, Moses's taut, beautifully modulated three-hander about steroid use among pro baseballers, feels like a homecoming. Sports' ruthless meritocracy makes an ideal playground for the status

struggles behind macho bonhomie, the tentative respect that flickers between rivals.

Athletes also make for rich characters: With their open competitive drive, they transmit a play's worth of subtextual conflict as naturally as they move. Watch the cocky Raul (James Martinez) strut around the weight room, coiled to strike, and contrast that with wary, wiry Kent (Jeremy Davidson), who hangs back until he's good and ready. When Kent (a thinly veiled stand-in for Mark McGwire, as Raul is for Jose Canseco) fixes his attention on a nervy rookie (Michael Mosley), it's riveting. "Hold the moment," Kent coaches the newbie, with regard to press conferences—practicing brilliantly what he preaches.

The play's brief against steroids slow-cooks from the 1984 Olympics to the 2005 congressional hearings. Outrage eventually emerges—like every other telling emotion in *Back Back Back*—with the bewildering force of a curveball pitch. Daniel Aukin's direction, clean as a line drive, accentuates what feels like a fresh insight from Moses: the razor's edge between the confidence to keep quiet and the terrible loneliness of not knowing what to say.—*Rob Weinert-Kendt*