

VARIETY

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Once again, Itamar Moses has changed the names to protect the guilty. In the writer's fun, structurally clever baseball dramedy "Back Back Back," the offending parties are Raul, Kent and Adam -- proxies for admitted steroid promoter [Jose Canseco](#), accused steroid user [Mark McGwire](#) and supposed steroid abstainer Walt Weiss, the [Oakland Athletics'](#) three consecutive rookies of the year from 1986-88. Although Moses tries for (and fails at) a lot of pseudo-intellectual dazzle about tradition, history and morality, his real interest is the bounds of friendship, and that's where his play shines.

.....it would seem theatergoers who are not baseball fans would need to be kindly disposed toward spoiled, drug-crazed multimillionaires who cheat at sports. And that's Moses' most impressive achievement: Kent and Raul are interesting people, especially with light-touch, funny performances from Jeremy Davidson and James Martinez to give them that little extra shot in the arm, figuratively speaking.

The actors are perfectly cast --none looks "filled with water," as Kent describes the more enthusiastic 'roid users, but both Kent and Raul are big guys with a lot of beefy, gym-built muscle, and Adam (Michael Mosley) looks skinny and collegiate next to them.

Raul prances around the weight room like he owns the place and offers to set up his teammates with everything from "this *ridiculous* girl I want you to meet" to injections of testosterone into the buttocks. Unsurprisingly, he gets less happy as the play goes along.

Helmer Daniel Aukin has framed the play with plenty of flash (sometimes literally -- press conferences are always heralded by a stuttering flashbulb effect), but he's also balanced Raul's arc very carefully, and his precision pays off.

Kent is quieter than his teammates and more conflicted about drug use. Is it cheating if everyone does it? That's the stupid question Canseco posed in his tell-all "Juiced," and it's one Kent seems to wrestle with here.

Raul is unconflicted, of course, but his natural talent doesn't amend his basic obnoxiousness, and he gets traded from one team to another.

Moses sets up a false climax in the seventh scene -- the only one in a dugout -- in which Adam gives Kent a piece of his mind. "I don't care if you're the savior of the sport, Kent," Adam hisses, "because the fact is the sport is fucked." This, apparently, is what the play was building up to: Baseball is in trouble.

But, the play has another, better climax, and it comes later, as Kent and Raul sit in the halls of Congress, waiting to testify about allegations in Raul's book (Canseco's book named a lot of people, but it dwelled on the phenomenally successful McGwire more than anyone else). In boiling the entire steroid scandal down to a poisoned friendship, Moses finally finds something he can sink his teeth into.

Which is not to say this excuses the play's flaws. Moses may do Canseco too great a service by crafting a rigorous intellectual rebuttal to claims about biochemistry and morality made in the attention-loving ballplayer's ghost-written autobio.

Granted, the overlap between the theater and sports worlds is not a large one -- for example, David Zinn's set, which is supposed to be a series of weight rooms at multimillion-dollar ballclubs, looks like fifth-period gym. But as soon as Moses outlines his topic, even the dimmest theatergoer will come to the same conclusions: Steroids bad. Baseball noble. Raul douchebag.

Where "Back Back Back" goes right is in the exploration of the three guys as characters. What kind of person would tempt his friend to sin and then destroy him for succumbing? That's a more interesting question than the widely debated "What have steroids done to baseball?"