

## **`Doors' swings open with laughs**

### **Superb Second City revue blames Bartman**

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Early in Joshua Funk's edgy, daring and formatively superb 90th mainstage Second City revue, "Doors Open on the Right," we see a woman and a baby standing atop a burning Chicago high-rise.

"Throw down your baby and I'll catch it," says a firefighter. And the woman obeys, tossing the tyke (well, a doll) down 70 stories (or the height of two or three wooden chairs, at least). But just as the firefighter is about to make a perfect catch, a dweeby but familiar-looking fellow with a blue Cubs baseball cap, a pair of ancient-looking headphones, and scraggly, flailing arms suddenly appears from stage left.

One can guess the rest. And it's not good for the falling baby.

But this is an entire show driven by the notion that Steve Bartman, the notorious playoff spoiler and undercover agent for the Florida Marlins, is to blame for every subsequent problem in the world.

"You're bad karma," sings Funk's young cast at that familiar, hapless, be-capped and vacant-looking visage that makes deer on the highway look like four-legged philosophy professors. "You're the ripple that caused the wave."

From a dashed marriage proposal where Bartman steals the proffered flowers at a pivotal moment, to Bartman grabbing those elusive Iraqi weapons of mass destruction right out of the hungry mitts of a desperate Bush administration, there's no atrocity here that Bartman does not commit with Zellig-like ubiquity. From the very moment of that stolen catch, Second City theorizes, everything around the globe went to hell.

It's an inspired and often riotously funny notion -- including a sidesplitting scene that imagines exactly what happened when Bartman first went home from the game. ("Hi Mom. Hi Dad." "We've packed your things and would like you out of the house tonight." "Where do you want me to go?" "How about Florida?"). And it works so well because, like the best Second City fare, it's a device that has mucho fun attacking Bartman, but also makes the bigger social point that his scapegoating has more to do with the insecure and dysfunctional Chicago psyche -- and by extension, the American psyche -- than with just his spoiling the joys of the local boys of summer.

For the last 18 months or so, the Second City mainstage has been in a Cubs-like slump, while the second-tier e.t.c. space (which had the benefit of performers like Keegan-Michael Key) was doing some of the long-established troupe's best work in years. This latest mainstage show features a mainly new cast -- only Brian Boland has been on the mainstage before -- and also represents director Funk's seemingly permanent shift from e.t.c. to the mainstage. And while this cast isn't yet turning in the kind of tour-de-force comic performances that people such as Key and Nyima Funk were doing at e.t.c., the vastly elevated level of the writing here represents a return to something approaching the fine mainstage revues of the mid-1990s.

If and when the performances evolve to match both the material and Funk's structural mastery of this form, this new era bodes very well. Antoine McKay, a Detroit import who does a dead-on Al Sharpton, has a lot of potential, and there's already one consistent standout performer in the big-mouthed Liz Cackowski, an ebullient, rubber-faced comedian whose future looks brighter than, say, Bartman's. Then again, never underestimate notoriety.

"Doors Open on the Right" is unabashedly partisan -- one of its more amusing segments involves a speech-recognition voting machine that responds "I think you said . . . George W. Bush" to every name thrown its way. And it has a clunky, derivative and woefully unfunny midsegment involving competing terrorists hijacking a plane.

But for the rest of the night, the laughs come thick and fast. Mainly they draw from that most abiding of Second City comic devices -- the sad-sack individual lost in a technological urban hell. The fault, of course, of Steve Bartman.