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DEAR EVAN HANSEN *** out of ****

THE ILLUSIONISTS: TURN OF THE CENTURY ** out of ****

THE BODYGUARD ** out of ****

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THE MUSIC BOX

Well, it's a hell of a week for composers Benj Pasek and Justin Paul. On Sunday, their acclaimed Off Broadway show *Dear Evan Hansen* opens on Broadway. Then on Friday December 9, their acclaimed movie *La La Land* opens in movie theaters with the stamp of approval from the New York critics (who called it the year's best) and Oscar buzz building to a crescendo. The movie is graced with two appealing leads in Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone.

On stage, their musical has a marvelous central performance by Ben Platt that will undoubtedly draw easy comparisons to the main role in the Tony-winning play *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-time*. That play won actor Alex Sharp a Tony and you can be certain Platt will be in the running for a Tony come June. He's the best reason to see a show with a lot of heart, some strong tunes and a book by Steve Levenson that is not the match of either.

The story is too gimmicky for its own good but undoubtedly the reason this got made in the first place. A geeky high school student somewhere on the autism spectrum is essentially sweet but hyper-verbal, withdrawn and has no friends. None. Neither does another kid with a far more violent, angry streak. When that kid — Connor Murphy — kills himself, a letter our hero Evan Hansen wrote to *himself* on his psychiatrist's orders is found. The dead kid's parents mistakenly think it's a suicide note and that Evan was their son's only friend.

Never very good at social situations (or even making eye contact, frankly), a nervous and embarrassed Evan can't bring himself to disabuse the parents about their mistake. It's the only comfort they have at this terrible time. Besides, he's so lonely it's sort of nice to pretend he actually does have a friend, even if it's a dead one. It doesn't hurt that he's had a crush on Connor's sister Zoe and now has an excuse to awkwardly talk to her.

One innocent lie leads to another and before you know it Evan is creating a series of fake emails to back up his claims, launching an online campaign called The Connor Project, gaining self-confidence, kind of dating Zoe and becoming almost...popular. Turns out Connor's suicide was the best thing that ever happened to him. It's no spoiler to say this fragile house of cards is going to collapse.

When I've talked about this show with friends, I have so many complaints to nitpick over that I continually find myself reassuring them, "But it's good" and assuring them it's worth seeing. So let's linger for a moment on the best feature of the show. Star Ben Platt gets genuine humor out of Evan's quick wit, even if it does explode out of him in bursts of rapid-fire intensity. He's jerky and his hands curl up and pluck at his shirt and he wipes his sweaty palms and he's just...odd. Yet he's also a funny and endearing person, loved by his mom, taking his meds and desperately sad and angry in a low-key, simmering sort of way. Platt (of the *Pitch Perfect* movies) brings him beautifully to life. While Platt is certainly a good-looking guy, he's not movie star handsome, which is important. Platt easily emphasizes the nerdy awkwardness of Evan whereas a more traditionally handsome actor might make you think, really? No one wants to be friends with him?

Evan stammers and stops and starts and stops again when speaking. But when he sings he comes alive and

we hear his inner thoughts soar. Platt sings in a lovely, stirring manner that continually allows him to show vulnerability and heart, putting the humanity of Evan ahead of making a merely pretty sound. Platt allows Evan to become more confident during the show, but never in a dramatic, transformational way — it's subtle and not too far from where Evan started. Theater buffs will want to see the musical just to see him.

The rest of the cast is uniformly good. Mike Faist is the dead kid Connor, but he makes a vivid first impression and has fun popping in as a spiritual adviser. The show also cleverly allows Platt and Faist to interact when Evan and his reluctant acquaintance Jared (a very good Will Roland) make up those emails to flesh out the lies Evan is telling. For a show about suicide, *Dear Evan Hansen* has a lot of humor and it mostly involves the interplay between these three actors.

On the downside, Laura Dreyfuss makes little impression as Evan's love interest Zoe and Kristolyn Lloyd does what she can with the thankless, underwritten role of an earnest classmate. Better are the grieving parents (tackled well by Jennifer Laura Thompson and Emmy winner Michael Park) and especially Evan's overburdened, doing-her-best mom, played with open-hearted vulnerability by Rachel Bay Jones.

While there's a plot point about Kickstarter and viral videos, the show isn't really about kids and social media or technology. We don't see students locked in their virtual worlds. We don't see Evan unhealthily escaping online or even healthily escaping online or anything of the sort. Yes, they use the internet but the show is not about the internet. Nonetheless the set is dominated by the scenic design of David Korins and the flashy projection design of Peter Nigrini, which includes constantly scrolling tweets and the like. It's not the razzle-dazzle of *Curious Incident* by any stretch, but it's eye-catching. That doesn't help since the set seems to be telling us the show maybe *does* have something to say about technology. More positively, the choreography by Danny Mefford has a natural style that doesn't call attention to itself. He makes effective use of a simple device — people often turn their back on Evan when he's lonely and they face him when he's not. Despite the visual overload, the direction by Michael Greif typically allows the actors to remain the focus throughout.

The central problem is the book by Levenson. Frankly, the characters of Evan and Connor — two loser kids who look like they might form an unexpected friendship — were convincing and appealing. I was perfectly ready to watch this odd couple find some common ground. I certainly didn't need or want the heavy-handed gimmick the show imposed of a suicide and an awkward misunderstanding. As it is, we have to spend three-quarters of the musical waiting for the inevitable moment when Evan is caught in his lie or feels pressured to confess. That's just not very interesting.

Worse, the show plays it fast and loose with Evan's quirks. Without naming it, they certainly imply he's on the autism spectrum. Evan rarely maintains eye contact with people, he's socially awkward, he's taking medication. he's seeing a specialist and so on. But thanks to the magical power of becoming popular, we see Evan gaining confidence, speaking more clearly and even dumping his meds. That's a dangerously misleading way to portray a serious health issue.

So which is it? If Evan is genuinely autistic, he's not going to be "cured" in a few days or weeks or even a few

months. Do autistic people simply need a romantic relationship to overcome their shyness? Seeing Evan stop taking his pills without consulting his doctor should result in serious repercussions or at least raise major alarms. But *Dear Evan Hansen* isn't really about autism the way *Curious Incident* was. That play allowed us to get to know its lead character more fully and see him as a complete person, but without dismissing or downplaying his autism. In contrast, this musical fetishizes the outward characteristics of someone on the spectrum to blithely paint their hero as adorably odd. Aren't autistic people cool, in a trendily weird way, it seems to suggest? But don't worry! Evan isn't really facing a chronic issue that may require a lifetime of medication. We'll give him a cute girlfriend and all those tiresome tics will mostly disappear. It's like one of those old movie make-overs where the prim librarian removes her glasses and lets down her hair.

But the most damaging flaw of the book is how the show fails completely to address the fallout of what Evan has done.

[SPOILER]

The entire piece builds and builds to the inevitable moment where it all falls apart. And what happens? Evan emotionally pours his heart out to a family that has almost adopted him as the less-troubled son they never had. He reveals the dreadful lie their relationship is built on — he wasn't friends with their son, every story he has told is a lie, the suicide note wasn't a suicide note and so on. He is crying and heartbroken but determined to tell the truth. And how do they react? We have no bloody idea because the show never allows us to see. That gives Evan all the glory of confessing and none of the backlash that would result.

In fact, it pivots to a confrontation between Evan and his loving mother. She realizes the suicide note is actually Evan writing to himself and — rather bizarrely — apologizes for not realizing how broken and damaged he feels inside. Evan says he never told her this and she responds that he shouldn't have to — she should just know.

This is absurd. From beginning to end, his mom has been loving and concerned. Yes, she struggles to get by economically. (Not that Evan lacks for a laptop or anything else needed by a teen.) His mom must work nights picking up shifts or studying hard to be a legal aide when she'd much rather spend quality time with him.

But she has never for a moment ignored her son and she certainly knows perfectly well that he has very serious issues. Evan is on medication, he sees a psychiatrist and she is so attentive and concerned that at one point he complains that she *only* sees him as broken and needing to be fixed. She is one hundred percent aware of her son's frailty and doing everything she can to make sure it is addressed by professionals, offering her support in every way one could hope for.

The idea that the show would climax with her expressing shock and surprise over his emotional turmoil is utterly at odds with everything we've seen. Combine that with the refusal to allow the grieving parents any reaction at all *and* a denouement that brushes everything he's done under the rug with an "It's all good!" hug from Zoe and you have a show that has chosen to avoid the messy reality of the very crisis it spent most of

the night creating. Evan gets to lie and lie and when he confesses, Evan gets to hog the spotlight yet again. And then he blames his mom for ignoring him — which is deeply unfair — and everyone else fades into the background.

It's disappointing precisely because so much of the musical is worthwhile, from Platt's star-making turn to some really moving songs like "Waving Through A Window" and "You Will Be Found." A musical with a strong score and a great lead performance is not to be dismissed, even if it does feature a confused visual design and a flawed book. I can't wait to hear those songs again when the cast album comes out. I wish they'd told a simpler story or I wish they'd treated the elaborate scheme they *did* depict with more commitment. *Dear Evan Hansen* turns out to be a letter without much of an ending. But it's given voice by songwriters and a star with the talent to keep you reading.

THE ILLUSIONISTS: TURN OF THE CENTURY ** out of ****

PALACE THEATRE

I love the romantic old fashioned idea of Broadway as a world that features major entertainers, vaudeville acts, dramas, comedies, musicals, stand-up and you name it all mingled together in one glorious circus. Unfortunately, Broadway is so expensive that a lot of what we get are tourist-focused musical product and once in a great while an original drama. So when the branded magic show *The Illusionists* came to Broadway a few years ago, I was all in to support this collection of varied acts as a holiday show. It worked commercially and they've come back ever since.

More power to them. I just wish the acts felt more like a greatest hits of current magic rather than a random mashing together of folk. Oddly, the least impressive aspect of *The Illusionists* is the actual magic. When you stop bothering to figure it out or waiting to be wowed, the strongest part of the show is the simple entertainment value of acts who do better with comedy and skill rather than the tricks meant to dazzle.

This year's hook is "Turn Of The Century," a nod to the early 1900s when magic acts dominated the imagination. You get a Harry Houdini-like escape artist (Jonathan Goodwin — The Daredevil), some big illusion masters, a mentalist duo called The Clairvoyants and more. It's a little over two hours and harmless family entertainment if you can take the less successful stuff on a campy level (many bits end with dramatic poses and flashing sparklers and lights).

On my last visit, the show wisely kept an ace in the hole: the finale was Yu Ho-Jin, a card sharp dubbed The Manipulator whose skill in tossing and throwing and making a spectacle of card work was elegant, simple and quite striking. This time, the top-billed act was actually the worst one by a mile. Thommy Ten and Amelie Van Tass call themselves The Clairvoyants and I'll ignore the fact that most of their stunts were unimpressive. A magic show is not about being fooled — the audience literally *wants* to be fooled, is indeed eager for it. It's really about entertainment. But their patter was awkward and tiresome, their opening stunt of speaking via a video screen and “reading” the mind of the entire audience wildly unimpressive and they stumbled over their lines and barely held the crowd's attention whenever they were front and center. It seemed like the first night of a preview for this duo, rather than a Broadway showcase for an act at the peak of its powers.

The night ended on a very flat note thanks to them and it was accentuated by the bizarre choice of director/creative producer Neil Dorward. He let everyone take a bow and then seemingly set up one last magical moment by encouraging the audience to sit back down. Thus we settled in, anticipating one final flourish...only to have the night end on a whimper with a mild goodbye to the crowd and a quiet fade-out. Showmanship it was not.

Indeed, most of the “big” magic — sawing someone in half, levitating and then making an assistant disappear — felt ho-hum. In contrast, Goodwin had very strong patter as The Daredevil and Jinger Leigh scored with an elegant, simple illusion involving a magical globe that soared around the stage. (It didn't matter that you wondered about wires or such — the piece itself was so visually captivating, you didn't care how it was done.) Justo Thaus as a puppeteer called The Grand Carlini was a delight. Dana Daniels as The Charlatan is a perfect case in point for what works well here: his vaudeville humor was thoroughly entertaining as Daniels bantered with a little boy and made relentless bad jokes. You just know he can be funny in any situation with any crowd.

And my favorite bit wasn't magic at all: it was Charlie Frye as the clownish but very talented juggler called The Eccentric. He was terrific fun and paired well with an uncredited, Margaret Dumont-like assistant whose deadpan demeanor was the perfect vinegar to his salt. Hmm, maybe they should launch another brand and bring vaudeville back to Broadway. With the best of this ragtag show, they're already halfway there.

THE BODYGUARD ** out of ****

PAPERMILL PLAYHOUSE

Well, what did you expect? *The Bodyguard* takes a very bad movie and uses it as an excuse to trot out a clutch of excellent pop tunes by the late Whitney Houston. It's cheese, pure and simple. Yet cheese melts and even Kraft sliced cheese can be tasty in the right situation. This nonsense takes itself a tad too seriously in the storyline. But god knows they don't miss a beat in delivering every two-bit trick in the book, from recreating not-so-iconic moments from the Kevin Costner-Whitney Houston vehicle to a confetti cannon at the end because, why not? Its saving grace is the wonderful Deborah Cox belting out those great pop songs with the magnetism of a real star. The rest is a giggle, though rarely intentionally so.

Do you remember the film? No, me neither. But *The Bodyguard* thinks you are desperately waiting for recreations of the moment Costner picked up Houston and carried her off like a white knight. Or the concert pose of Houston looking up, arm raised to the skies. Or that absurd finale at a desolate cabin, which Costner's bodyguard — with a notably *awful* track record — decided would be just the place for him to keep his pop star, her sister and her son all safe and sound...by himself.

You can be a snob or you can just give in, from the Vegas opener where we let Cox belt out a big number with dancers gyrating around in shirtless glory to the villain who stands on stage brandishing a knife so we know he's dangerous to the thunderous music that underlines dramatic moments or even the hilariously over-the-top stunt of beginning the entire night before the lights have gone down with a gunshot so loud it makes the entire audience leap in their seats and then burst out laughing. And of course, the confetti cannon. It's that kind of show.

I saw Deborah Cox for the first time in a revival of *Jekyll & Hyde* and was duly impressed by her stage presence and solid acting. I thought, “She really deserves her own show.” I should have been more specific: she deserves her own, *good* show. Hopefully it’ll happen soon. If you’re a fan, you will see Cox hold forth with about half an hour of what amounts to a concert of Houston’s hits, typically performing them with respect for the great original arrangements but with enough of her own flair on the edges to make clear she’s her own woman.

Her acting in the role of a spoiled diva who slowly warms to a laconic bodyguard (Judson Mills) is scattershot at best, but then everyone is pretty bad in the show. The blame lies solely with the god-awful material they’ve been given, which tweaks the screenplay to no good effect. Director Thea Sharrock has done some terrific work in the UK but this is schlock and she makes no pretense to more, offering up a hiss-able villain, some cheap shock moments delivered with loud noises and — of course — a sing-along at the curtain call. The low point — or perhaps the high point — was “I Will Always Love You” at the climax. The bodyguard Frank feels he simply must move on (god knows why) and walks out the door. The heartbroken star is offstage. She begins the famous a cappella intro to one of the biggest hits of all time and then quietly strolls into view. Cox can sing the hell out of the song and I thought we might finally be given a classy, simple presentation of a great song with great vocals.

What was I thinking? A scrim is lowered and Cox is relegated to the dim back regions of the stage (during her big number!) and a giant — and I do mean GIANT — projection of the bodyguard’s face is slapped onto the scrim. He just left the room; does the show really think we might have forgotten what the guy looks like? Plus, his image is so big it looms over the stage and poor Cox like the great and powerful Oz. Then we get a video montage of their scenes together as a trip down memory lane, a typical mistake for a show which tries to recreate movie techniques rather than doing what the stage does best. Meanwhile, Cox is singing her heart out, not that we’ve been allowed to see her very clearly behind that scrim. At the end, she’s given a costume change and put on a platform and it rises up to the heavens. At least we can see her. A simple spotlight and Cox’s talent would have been far more magnetic.

The tech credits are by and large forgettable, though the costumes of Tim Hatley (who also did the sets) do on occasion get to make Cox look fabulous. Of the rest of the actors, only Jasmin Richardson has a good story to tell: she delivers the best performance by far as the jealous sister of Cox and sings great, too.

They do create one good original scene: the bodyguard Mills and Cox head to a karaoke club for a date of sorts. He loses a bet and the game Mills (who somehow keeps his dignity despite being asked to out-terse the terse Costner) warbles a tune. Then he cajoles Cox into doing the same. Naturally, she blows the roof off the place and the delirious, joyous reaction of the people in the club is genuinely fun and fresh. They might have had fun with the basic structure of the film and done more like this to loosen it up. Instead, they felt

weirdly limited by a popcorn flick almost nobody really liked much at the time and which is barely remembered today. Did they think they had to treat it like a beloved classic? Ironically, the creative team protected the movie's essential badness with more vigor than the bodyguard ever did for his client.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise ***

Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2

Something Rotten ***

Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

Broadway & The Bard * 1/2

Prodigal Son **

A Bronx Tale: The Musical **

Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **

Nice Fish ***

Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***

Hughie **

Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2

Straight ** 1/2

Eclipsed ***

Red Speedo ***

The Royale ** 1/2

Boy ****

The Robber Bridegroom ***

Hold On To Me, Darling ***

Blackbird ** 1/2

Disaster! *

The Effect ** 1/2

Dry Powder ** 1/2

Head Of Passes ** 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2

The Crucible (w Ben Whishaw) ***

Bright Star **

She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***

Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***

RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2

Nathan The Wise ** 1/2

The Father **

American Psycho **

Waitress ** 1/2

Fully Committed ** 1/2

Long Day's Journey Into Night ***

A Streetcar Named Desire (w Gillian Anderson) ***

Tuck Everlasting **

War **

Paramour * 1/2

Troilus & Cressida (Shakespeare in the Park) ** 1/2

Cats (on Broadway, 2016 revival) **

The Encounter (Complicite on Broadway) **

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (at Two River Theater) ***

Oh, Hello ** 1/2

Heisenberg ** 1/2

The Dudleys ** 1/2

Holiday Inn * 1/2

A Life ** 1/2

Love Love Love ** 1/2

The Radicalization Of Rolfe (FringeFest NYC) ** 1/2

Sweat * 1/2

The Death of The Last Black Man In The Whole Entire World aka The Negro Book Of The Dead ***

Falsettos **

Dead Poets Society ** 1/2

Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812 *** (but ** 1/2 if you've seen it before)

Sweet Charity (w Sutton Foster) **

Mouse: The Persistence Of An Unlikely Thought *** 1/2

Dear Evan Hansen ***

The Illusionists: Turn Of The Century **

The Bodyguard **

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.