

# HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

## Theater: A Fighting Cock; A Not-So-Wild 'Geese' on Broadway

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YEAR OF THE ROOSTER \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
THE SNOW GEESE \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

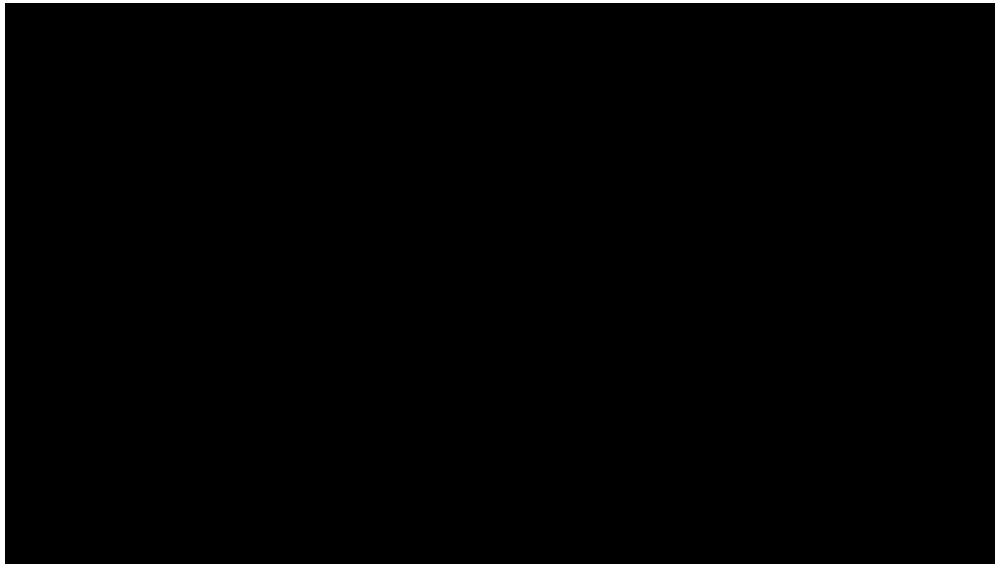
YEAR OF THE ROOSTER \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
ENSEMBLE STUDIO THEATRE

For 45 years, the Ensemble Studio Theatre has been nurturing new voices. Clearly it's been hitting a new peak under the artistic direction of William Carden. They've received Obie awards and serious success with shows like *Hand To God* and *Finks*. An EST show is sure to have a distinctive voice, very talented actors and a spirit of passionate support.

That's all on display with *Year Of The Rooster* by Eric Dufault. EST has been with this writer from the start of the project, taking it from a rough idea on paper to sharing a few pages to a workshop staging and now this full production on their mainstage to launch a new season. It's peopled with excellent performances (kudos to casting director Tom Rowan) and makes the most of modest resources to get across the idea of a young talent. Room for growth can be seen in a second act that loses its way a bit. But this is a funny, fierce work and you leave eager to see the playwright's next one. That's what EST does at its best and they do it here.

The premise is a simple one: Gil Pepper (Thomas Lyons) has an ailing mother (a good Delphi Harrington), a miserable job at McDonald's (is that redundant?) and an ace in the hole. That ace in the hole is a rooster he's been nurturing since birth for a role in cock-fighting, the blood sport Gil has loved since he was a little boy. His rooster Oydssseus Rex might just give Gil a shot at salvation.

Standing in his way is Dickie Thimble (Denny Dale Bess), the biggest cockfight promoter and manager around. Also causing trouble is Gil's abrasive, wildly ambitious boss at McDonald's named Philipa (Megan Tusing), who might just possibly be masking a loneliness herself.



So the setup is straightforward: a Rocky-like tale of a young man and his rooster looking for redemption in the ring. But it's presented with style and vigor. The show begins with the rooster Oydssseus (Bobby Moreno) jutting his head out onto the stage in dramatic lighting courtesy of Greg MacPherson. Moreno is sporting a funny but somehow just-right costume created by Sydney Maresca that uses a t-shirt, various feathers and a bad-ass hairdo that gets you right into the mood of this punkish, attitude-brimming character. Apparently, roosters aren't heralding the dawn; in fact, they're calling out the sun with taunts and jeers. Odysseus hates, hates, hates the sun and Moreno launches with hilarious determination into a monologue about how one day he'll tear that bastard to shreds. Moreno is smart, sexy, funny and thoroughly committed to what might have been a ludicrous task of jumping around the stage as a rooster. In the show's best performance, Moreno (who was also very good in *Hand To God*) lets you know it's okay to laugh but this is serious business.

The use of classical music is well-judged and director John Giampietro keeps the entire cast on the same page. The abundant humor is mined without swamping the dark undercurrents (with a rooster named Odysseus and numerous references to the Greeks, you probably shouldn't expect a happy ending). Act One builds very successfully to a big fight well staged by Qui Nguyen complete with flying feathers and a large assist from the sound design of Shane Rettig.

I could have left happily right then. But the characters are rich enough to take further and that's what act two attempts. Unfortunately, the storyline of our hero Gil doesn't quite track. When his mother suffers a painful loss, he's more callous than one might expect. And while of course the show is looking at male rage and frustrated desires and the need to assert oneself, Gil's arc isn't convincing as he grows from wimpy to quietly confident and then back to wimpy and then something entirely new at the end. Similarly, the rooster Odysseus evolves from his boisterous anti-sun monologues to a lovelorn romantic over the pudgy chicken Gil brings home for him to mate with. That's all to the good but he slips back into his original state towards the end in an unsatisfying way. A truly great play would have shown both their destinies entwined or crossing paths in some telling manner. And given the fresh voice he displays already, Dufault might very well have a great one in him.

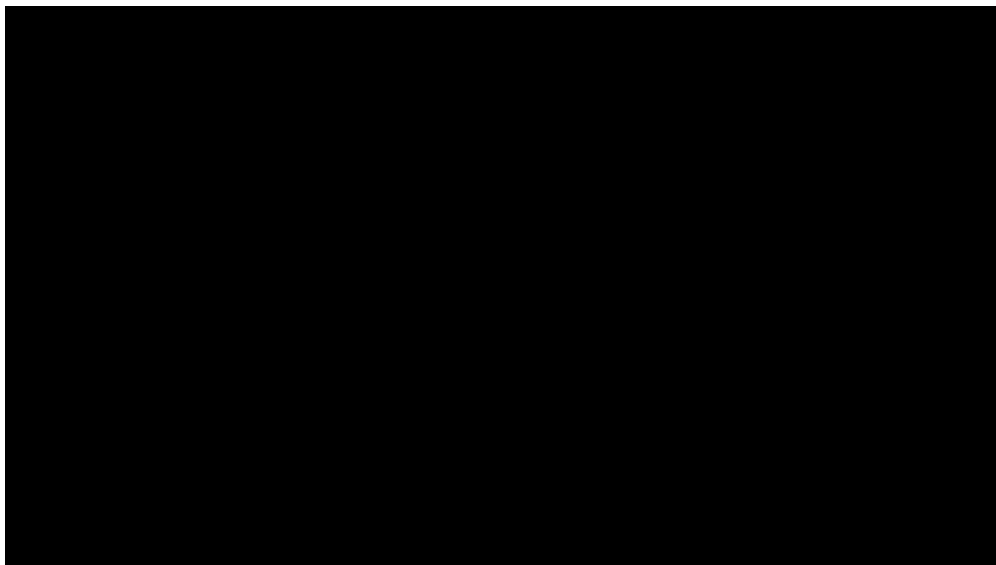
Certainly, he's been given a loving presentation here. Lyons is quite good as the sad sack Gil, shining especially in the monologue where he describes a happy moment with his father. Harrington makes the most of the more modest part of his unhappy mother. Bess is strong as the pushy, mean-spirited cockfight manager; he's less good in creating a distinctive rooster to compete with Odysseus in the big fight, a rare acting let-down in the show. In contrast, Tusing is excellent as the career-minded McDonald's boss *and* as the chicken that wins the heart of Gil's champion rooster. Their mating ritual with both actors bopping and pecking their heads at each other is a highlight. And Moreno makes the most of a part that comes fully to life thanks to his magnetic appeal, acting chops and physical confidence on stage. You root for Odysseus during his big fight if only because the last thing you want is for Moreno to leave the stage.

**THE SNOW GEESE \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\***  
**MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT THE SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE**

Writer Sharr White returns to Broadway with a new play. He hasn't hit one out of the park yet, but it's encouraging to see talent get an opportunity to grow and learn on the big stage. In January, I caught up with *The Other Place*, an over-stuffed drama with 27 plot-lines but a good showcase nonetheless for actress Laurie Metcalf. *The Snow Geese* is more focused and defined and while it's still not wholly successfully as a drama, it does again provide some good roles for excellent actors like Mary Louise Parker and a prime showcase for newcomer Brian Cross. At this rate, by 2015 White will be winning Tonys for himself and his cast in yet another show.

The story feels like an evergreen of sorts, with some not-so-new variations. A once wealthy family has fallen on hard times. They retreat to their country estate in upstate New York in 1917 for the annual goose hunt, while the war to end all wars rages on. Elizabeth (Parker) is still mourning the death of her husband and unable to face the reality of their financial straits. Her sister Clarissa (Victoria Clark) is a no-nonsense presence holding down the fort with the modest help of husband Max (the always dependable Danny Burstein). He's rather downtrodden himself since Max is a doctor, or rather was. He may be American now but he's from Germany and that thick accent has sent his clients fleeing for good.

Duncan (Evan Jonigkeit) has swanned home for a quick break before heading off to the trenches in one of New York's most blue-blooded new regiments. Like all his upper class friends, Duncan can't imagine being in any danger and just hopes the war doesn't end before he can get over there and have an adventure. Little brother Arnold (Cross) is reaching a boiling point since his mother clearly favors Duncan and won't listen to reason. Hovering in the background as a very real symbol of the ravages of war is their maid, a war refugee named Victorya (Jessica Love). She's the daughter of aristocrats who has lost everything and finds herself reduced to menial labor.



If you imagine this Chekhovian scenario will lead to bitter recriminations, threats of suicide, angry words, heartfelt statements and perhaps a dash of romance that can't quite dissipate the gloom, well, needless to say you're right.

Certainly one won't fault the solid direction of Daniel Sullivan, who makes the most of a piece that doesn't quite know what it wants to do. He's aided inestimably by the handsome production they've mounted. John Lee Beatty's set is wonderful: it evokes the heavy, wooden, old-money feel of a hunting lodge with ease. But the walls and ceiling are gone. So always present is the gloom of the forest, the darkness of mourning and the clouds of war. That set combines well with the lighting of Japhy Weideman and the music and sound design of Dan Moses Schreier for an evocative atmosphere. The lone off touch is a dramatic end to act one where a projection design of geese taking to flight looks more like an attack from Hitchcock's *The Birds*. Otherwise, *The Snow Geese* has been given a setting worthy of its ambitions.

Parker is of course the big draw but the story is really about the two sons. Her scene of reaching out to both of them near the end feels a little too spot-on to truly satisfy but that's the fault of the writing not the actress. On the other hand, quite a few characters surprise us and there are enough moments of quiet power to make clear that White is growing as a talent. Duncan carelessly calls his uncle a dirty kraut at one point; watching Max give his forgiveness to the boy is quite moving. Clark has fun with her tone-deaf but hymn-loving sister and the scene when she shows a readiness to be practical is very satisfying.

Parker holds our attention even as Elizabeth tries our patience. The scene where she seems to be laughing but soon lets out a howl of despair is riveting. And while the flashback to a happy time with her husband feels superfluous, the transition back to the present is handled by her with moving economy. That maid Victorya surprises us at several points -- almost as much as she surprises the family members when speaking up. Love has created a vivid character out of the notes supplied by White and it's a promising Broadway debut.

But best of all is Cross as the over-looked son Arnold. Jonigkeit plays Duncan, the golden child of the family. He captures the petulance of the part but not the winning charm of the privileged that would make us like Duncan despite his callow behavior. In contrast, Cross must spout hard truths and upset his mother and indeed everyone around him by constantly reminding them of the family's travails. He's jealous of his brother, hurt by his mother's clear preference and just a little besotted of the maid, cliché though that may be. In an excellent turn that bodes well for his future, Cross makes the most of arguably the meatiest part in the show. It's a notable debut. And giving good roles to two young actors bodes well for White; surely he'll take flight soon and justify the faith in those who have backed him so far.

#### **THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)**

*The Other Place* \*\* 1/2  
*Picnic* \* 1/2  
*Opus No. 7* \*\* 1/2  
*Deceit* \* 1/2  
*Life And Times Episodes 1-4* \*\*  
*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (w Scarlett Johansson) \* 1/2  
*The Jammer* \*\*\*  
*Blood Play* \*\* 1/2  
*Manilow On Broadway* \*\* 1/2  
*Women Of Will* \*\* 1/2  
*All In The Timing* \*\*\*  
*Isaac's Eye* \*\*\*  
*Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery* \*\* 1/2  
*The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County* \* 1/2  
*Much Ado About Nothing* \*\*\*  
*Really Really* \*  
*Parsifal at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Madrid* \* 1/2  
*The Wild Bride at St. Ann's* \*\* 1/2  
*Passion at CSC* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Carousel* at Lincoln Center \*\*\*  
*The Revisionist* \*\*  
*Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella* \*\*\*  
*Rock Of Ages* \* 1/2  
*Ann* \*\* 1/2  
*Old Hats* \*\*\*  
*The Flick* \*\*\*  
*Detroit '67* \*\* 1/2  
*Howling Hilda* reading \* (Mary Testa \*\*\*)  
*Hit The Wall* \*  
*Breakfast At Tiffany's* \* 1/2  
*The Mound Builders* at Signature \*  
*Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Cirque Du Soleil's Totem* \*\*\*  
*The Lying Lesson* \* 1/2  
*Hands On A Hardbody* \*  
*Kinky Boots* \*\*  
*Matilda The Musical* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream* \*\*\*  
*Motown: The Musical* \*\*  
*La Ruta* \*\* 1/2  
*The Big Knife* \*  
*The Nance* \*\*\*  
*The Assembled Parties* \*\* 1/2  
*Jekyll & Hyde* \* 1/2  
*Thoroughly Modern Millie* \*\* 1/2  
*Macbeth* w Alan Cumming \*  
*Orphans* \*\* 1/2  
*The Testament Of Mary* \*\* 1/2  
*The Drawer Boy* \*\*  
*The Trip To Bountiful* \*\*\*  
*I'll Eat You Last* \*\* 1/2  
*Pippin* \*  
*This Side Of Neverland* \*\*\*  
*A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney* \*\*\*  
*Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812* \*\*\*

Colin Quinn Unconstitutional \*\* 1/2  
 A Family For All Occasions \*  
 The Weir \*\*\* 1/2  
 Disney's The Little Mermaid \*\*  
 Far From Heaven \*\*  
 The Caucasian Chalk Circle \*\*  
 Somewhere Fun \*\*  
 Venice no stars  
 Reasons To Be Happy \*\*  
 STePz \*\*\* 1/2  
 The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) \*\*\*  
 Roadkill \*\* 1/2  
 Forever Tango \*\*\*  
 Monkey: Journey To The West \*\* 1/2  
 The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me \*\*\*  
 NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson \*\*  
 NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes \* 1/2  
 NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets \*\*\*  
 NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream \*\*  
 NYMF: Mother Divine \*\*  
 NYMF: Julian Po \*\* 1/2  
 NYMF: Marry Harry \*\*  
 NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist \*\* 1/2  
 NYMF: Castle Walk \*\*\*  
 NYMF: Crossing Swords \*\*\*  
 NYMF: Bend In The Road \*\*\* 1/2  
 NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars  
 NYMF: Volleygirls \*\*\* 1/2  
 Murder For Two \*\*  
 Let it Be \*\*  
 The Cheaters Club \*  
 All The Faces Of The Moon \*  
 Women Or Nothing \*\* 1/2  
 Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play \* 1/2  
 You Never Can Tell \*\*\*  
 Romeo And Juliet \*  
 Arguendo \*\*  
 August Wilson's American Century Cycle \*\*\*\*  
 The Glass Menagerie \*\* 1/2  
 Lady Day \* 1/2  
 Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse \*\*\*\*  
 Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical \*\* 1/2  
 Bronx Bombers \* 1/2  
 Romeo & Juliet at CSC \* 1/2  
 A Night With Janis Joplin \*\*  
 The Winslow Boy \*\*\*  
 Juno And The Paycock \*\*  
 How I Learned To Drive \*\*  
 Fun Home \*\*  
 Two Boys at the Met \*\*  
**Big Fish** \*\*  
**A Time To Kill** \* 1/2  
 Year Of The Rooster \*\*\*  
 The Snow Geese \*\* 1/2

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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.

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