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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: November 23, 2010 01:23 AM

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Theater: *A Free Man of Color* Intrigues; *Elling* Is Overwhelmed

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A FREE MAN OF COLOR ** 1/2 out of **** At Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont

Writer John Guare's first new play on Broadway in 18 years FEELS like his first new play in 18 years. It is ambitious, overstuffed and fascinating, even though it never clicks. But the talent onstage -- both Guare's writing and the cast dedicated to bringing it (fitfully) to life -- is impressive. The story is set mostly in New Orleans, a city depicted as a paradise of sorts in 1801. A free man of color like Cornet (Jeffrey Wright) can bed the women, bedazzle the men and enjoy life to the fullest. Slaves exist in New Orleans but they have

certain rights and can and do attain freedom. So not heaven, but a far sight better than the United States at the time.

The bitter irony is that when New Orleans joins the United States thanks to the Louisiana Purchase, life becomes worse for many people in that city. The US might be an inspiration to the world and its ideal that "all men are created equal" was stirring. It just wasn't true, not in practice and not any longer in New Orleans. (And let's not even mention the women.)

This growing realization that the US had fallen short of its promise is mirrored in the show, which begins as a frothy romp (complete with rhymed couplets a la *La Bete*) and ending in a dark and serious vein as Cornet lambastes Thomas Jefferson. Unfortunately, dozens of actors and rhymes tumbling on top of each other never do more than modestly amuse. Wright gives a wonderfully precise performance that knows exactly where the play is emotionally at every stage but he can't find the jokes because there simply aren't that many in a story of a lothario surrounded by idiotic men and fawning women overwhelmed by his large endowment. (Really, Mr. Guare? Tongue in cheek doesn't make something any less thuddingly obvious.)

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Olbermann: 'Put The Gun Metaphors Away'

Mos (the rapper and actor who has apparently shortened his name from Mos Def) offers the richest vein of humor as a slave who works for Cornet with grudging effectiveness. (Mos also doubles as the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture.) But there's an awful lot of moving parts at work just to deliver some smiles.

Everyone seems happier when the tone shifts to despair. "Hang on!" is the imperative that slaves and once-free men of color are urged to embrace and the audience surely feels the same as the show nears the three hour mark and our hero's journey is somehow entangled with that of Meriwether Lewis (Paul Dano) the explorer who helped map America but never shook his existential despair over the experience.

George C. Wolfe directs with his usual, masterful fluidity. For such a confused, rambling show, Wolfe always maintains a flow and flair that lets us believe much more is happening than truly is. The cast is uniformly solid and the staging as unstinting as one would expect from Lincoln Center. Usually one needs to see an opera to enjoy a cast this multitudinous and talented in service of a plot this needlessly complicated.

What others are saying:

Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* said, "[Guare] seems less to be juggling than tossing bright balls of allusion and information onto the stage and praying that they'll land in a coherent pattern."

Jeremy Gerard of *Bloomberg* gave it 3 out of 4 stars and said, "A sprawling, frequently messy play, it jolts from stylized comedy to satire to funereal dirge with little regard for the discomfort of a bumpy ride."

Dan Bacalzo of *Theatermania* said, "If you can make it through the dreadful first act, the play ultimately rewards the patient theatergoer with an intriguing look at the complex political landscape in New Orleans and beyond, at the beginning of the 19th century. But until then, John Guare's latest play is a wearying mash-up of styles, most notably Restoration Comedy and historical drama, and George C. Wolfe's production struggles to achieve a coherent tone."

ELLING ** out of ****

At the *Ethel Barrymore*

I saw *Elling* in London in 2007 (my how time flies). It had a long history -- Norwegian novels turned into Oscar nominated films and prequels and sequels and stage shows. But I knew none of that and was a tad confused as to how this comedy came to feature two characters with offbeat names like Elling (Dennis O'Hare) and Kjell Bjarne (Brendan Fraser). Still, the play was conventional if effective and ultimately quite moving. It also was staged at the Bush Theater, which I'm pretty certain would fit quite comfortably onto the stage of the Ethel Barrymore, including the stage, the seats, and the audience.

In that intimate setting, this tale of two oddballs who are graduating from a mental institution and given a chance to live on their own was delicate and sweet. The rhythm of the comedy as the fuss-budget Elling offered withering comments to the oafish, sex-happy Kjell was in sync with the audience that surrounded them in the tiny Bush.

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Queen's Royal Wedding

On Broadway, unfortunately, the show by Simon Bent seems stranded. The timing of O'Hare and Fraser (assisted by a game Jennifer Coolidge and the great Richard Easton) is thrown off by the vast expanse of a Broadway stage. If *Elling* offers anything, it's an intimate and modest pleasure. Doing it on Broadway is like taking a magic act devoted to sleight of hand and close-up illusions and putting it in Madison Square Garden. It doesn't help that the set is spare and cold, with blank walls overwhelming almost everything else. This is more *Odd Couple* than *Waiting For Godot* and the unforgiving atmosphere of the set and lighting work against its charms every step of the way.

Fraser makes a fine debut and O'Hare still manages to wring laughs out of a setting that works against the play every step of the way. *Elling asks what it means to be crazy...*no, actually it doesn't. These guys are a bit nutty but sweet and the show never questions their need for support to get by or their ability to live rich and full lives. The only craziness on display here is blowing up a simple little show into a Broadway event deadened by the size of the theater and an unlovable set.

What others are saying:

Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* said, "Fitfully funny, thanks primarily to the energetic efforts of Mr. O'Hare, but mostly just a puzzling fizzle."

Jeremy Gerard of Bloomberg gave it 2 1/2 out of 4 stars and said, "This would be little more than an extended, predictable sitcom about cute crazies were it not for the utterly committed performances."

David Finkle of Theatermania said, "O'Hare, who has been flashing his quirks in local theaters for some time, is a walking twitch and in time is wonderful as such, while Fraser gleefully deglamorizes himself and throws himself and his imposing, fleshy physique into the role. It's their talents that often redeem a script that too often devolves into a second-rate on-stage buddy flick."

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes*. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

NOTE: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to the shows in previews with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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mamacat 10:19 PM on 11/27/2010

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My partner and I have watched and enjoyed the movie "Elling" a few times, and consider it a rare gem of a film. I was not aware that it was now a stage production. If circumstances ever permit, we would, I think, enjoy attending. Thanks for the info.

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kevinbr38 08:59 AM on 11/23/2010

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I just completed Toni Morrison's novel, A Mercy, which touches on some of the themes that seem to be present in Mr. Guare's play. A very interesting time in American history, that unfortunately isn't discussed often anymore. Jeffrey Wright is one of the most talented actors around. Wish I was in NYC to see this production.

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Michael Giltz 12:42 AM on 11/24/2010

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How was the book?

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kevinbr38 04:14 AM on 11/24/2010

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Excellent, as one would expect. My only complaint was that it was too short. It was very lyrical, though not as filled with ambiguous references like some of her other work. In other work, the story could be read on face value. (Hope that made sense, haven't finished my coffee yet).

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farginbastidge 08:33 AM on 11/23/2010

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Hmm. A play about a free man of African descent, based in New Orleans in the early 1800's, and called "A Free Man of Color." I wonder how Barbara Hambly feels about that. The actual story is obviously very different from her novel, but really--they couldn't come up with a different title?

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carnegie 04:49 PM on 11/23/2010

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The phrase was in common usage long before her book.

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