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**Michael Giltz**  
Freelance writer and raconteur  
Posted: November 16, 2010 08:30 PM

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# Theater: Al Pacino in Subtle *Merchant Of Venice*; An Obvious *Elf* and More

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Four shows opened in the last few days: a marvelous Shakespeare revival with a big Hollywood star (Al Pacino), a sweet movie turned into a heavy-handed musical, a show about a theatrical producer trying to land a big Hollywood star and some campy fluff.

- The Merchant Of Venice* \*\*\* 1/2
- Elf* \*
- Mistakes Were Made* \*\* 1/2
- Devil Boys From Beyond* \*\*

**THE MERCHANT OF VENICE** \*\*\* 1/2  
At the Broadhurst

On the stage you see curved black metal fences and black metal staircases leading to platforms; some barriers are waist high while others are tall enough to close in the tallest man. After getting over your fears about sight lines (surely, you hope, the pieces will slide this way and that -- and indeed they do), you notice the black metalwork on the back wall and suddenly realize it's a giant abacus, row upon row of beads to be slid back and forth when counting and a constant reminder of how money dominates everything.

Soon the set is put into action. In the first scene the tall metalwork is slid out front and it's a fence, a wall, keeping out the Jews from the inner sanctum where the men of Venice do business. (Dead center inside the fenced off area is a stock ticker.) Back and forth, guards keep opening the fence to let in decent men

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then close them off again to keep out the Jews, even though the men inside come to the fence and must plead with the Jews to loan money when their gambles go bad. At other points, the fences become a cage, keeping the Jew Shylock trapped inside -- even when he's in his own establishment. Again and again the fences rotate around the stage, blocking and frustrating the money-men with an elegant simplicity. Your money can slip through the bars, but you? Not a chance.

The marvelous set is just one element in the most thoughtful, balanced production of *The Merchant Of Venice* I've seen. It's an ugly play and this show doesn't shy away from that. Invariably, it hinges on the performer playing Shylock. How Jewish will he be? How assimilated? Will the show be afraid of his revenge or revel in it? If the show is too timid, Shylock doesn't register and the show has no purpose. More often, the actor playing Shylock chews up everything in sight and when he leaves the stage it peters out to the end.

Here Al Pacino is unabashedly Jewish; no fitting in for this man. But he also keeps the performance reined in and at the service of the play. You never doubt the ugliness of the anti-Semitism that embitters Shylock. And you never doubt that he wants his pound of flesh. But in this production by Daniel Sullivan, the play does not tilt towards Shylock or these prejudicial issues. It seems, above all, to be about the untrustworthiness of men, especially lovers.

When Bassanio (a solid David Harbour) pleads unfairly with his friend Antonio (the easily pliable Byron Jennings) to front his deeply in debt friend even more money so Bassanio can woo Portia, the younger man gently massages Antonio's neck, knowing Antonio's love for him and playing on it easily, though almost without thought. He's not trying to rook Antonio; Bassanio just wants what he wants.

When Jessica (Heather Lind) runs off with the callow and comely youth Lorenzo (Seth Numrich in his fine Broadway debut), it doesn't take long for reality to set in about her romantic lover. Just hours after they've eloped he seems petulant, yanking his hand away from hers when she tries to hold it.

And when Bassiano and Gratiano (a lively Jesse L. Martin) break their vows to their lovers Portia (Lily Rabe) and Nerissa (Marsha Stephanie Blake) so soon, so easily, you can feel their disappointment. A scene often performed playfully where the women reveal their disguises and tease their men for giving away the rings they promised to hold dear is here bittersweet. Night is setting at the end of the show on both the day's events and their illusions.

Pacino is marvelous, especially given the temptations that Shylock offers. In ways subtle and direct, we see he and the other Jewish men of Venice treated like dogs again and again. Antonio, of course, is the worst of all -- not just because he tries to cheat Shylock out of the profitable business of getting restitution from men who have defaulted on their loans, but because Antonio also leads everyone in railing constantly against the Jews.

Shylock is stunned when his daughter elopes (with a chest of money to boot), but Pacino doesn't stumble about in rage and despair. He just seems... adrift, lost, a shell of a man. Shylock latches onto revenge as the only way to give his life purpose again and Pacino comes back to life. He wants his pound of flesh. But when Antonio gets the upper hand and demands Shylock convert to Christianity, we realize the stakes: Shylock threatens a life but Antonio threatens a soul. When Shylock is baptized, it's done in a pool of water in the middle of the stage and the baptizer thrusts his head under with ferocity, practically

PHOTOS: Guess Whose Sister

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drowning the man in the process.

Pacino exits, but not before defiantly kissing his kippah. It allows a little humanity in his last moment, but you worry Shylock will be beaten or worse for his act. But it's the final scenes after Pacino is gone that define this show, scenes that so often seem like an afterthought. Here they are deadly serious. Portia (a triumph as well for Rabe) has won the safety of Antonio, but also convinced her lover Bassanio to part with a keepsake.

It's a trifle really and Portia knows the reluctance with which he did it. And yet, she doesn't let him off the hook. This *Merchant* has no heroes, not even the clever Portia. Bassanio isn't fickle, just reluctantly persuaded by his closest friend just saved from death and a clever lawyer who accomplished this miracle. But Portia takes it to heart. She doesn't see a decent if self-centered lug who lives moment to moment and tries to do his best. Portia sees a flawed man who from the very start can't live up to her expectations. Their marriage is just beginning but for her, the honeymoon is over and shadows are creeping in.

#### What others have said:

**Ben Brantley of *The New York Times*** said, "Absolutely splendid...Giving what promise to be the performances of this season, Lily Rabe, as Portia the heiress, and Al Pacino, as Shylock the usurer, invest the much-parsed trial scene of this fascinating, irksome work with a passion and an anger that purge it of preconceptions."

**Elizabeth Vincentelli of the *New York Post*** gave it 3 out of 4 stars and said, "You come to see Al Pacino, but you stay for Lily Rabe."

**Joe Dziemianowicz of the *New York Daily News*** gave it 4 out of 5 stars and said, "The cause for cheers is director Daniel Sullivan's stirring version of "The Merchant of Venice," co-commanded by Al Pacino, a supernova you already know, as the moneylender Shylock, and Lily Rabe, a rising star you should, as the heiress Portia."

**John Simon of *Bloomberg*** gave it 3 out of 4 stars and said, "Courageously, director Daniel Sullivan avoids making the revenge-thirsty moneylender more assimilated and sympathetic, or the duplicitous Christians less anti-Semitic. Essentially, we have here a comedic Jew, as the playwright no doubt intended him, in a part that today comes close to the tragic.

**ELF** \* out of \*\*\*\*

At the Al Hirschfeld Theatre

*Elf* was a sweet little movie featuring one of Will Ferrell's best performances and our first realization that Zoey Deschanel could sing. In the story, Buddy is a little boy raised at the North Pole by the elves. Even though he's twice the size of everyone else, Buddy is a little dim and doesn't clue in that he's...different. Finally, when he's all grown up (physically if not emotionally) Santa spills the beans and Buddy is off to New York City to find his dad, a high-powered businessman who might just need to learn the true meaning of Christmas. Ferrell had a naughty little glee in the role, but never varied from the innocence that made Buddy a charmer. Like a little kid, he wore you down with his enthusiasm.

It's not the worst idea for a musical, though it did smack of opportunism. This is a ready-made property that can tour during the holidays and rake it in when families are looking for an outing they can all enjoy. But why be so cynical? Maybe Thomas Meehan (*Hairspray*, *The Producers*, *Annie*) and Bob Martin (*The Drowsy Chaperone*) aren't just guns for hire. Maybe Matthew Sklar and Chad Beguelin weren't chosen just because they did *The Wedding Singer* on Broadway and hey, that was a movie turned into a musical as well.

But Christmas cheer (before Thanksgiving, no less!) is hard to come by and the show very quickly confirms your most Scrooge-like fears. George Wendt of *Cheers* is Santa Claus and he's soon forced to make jokes about Santa having an iPad, Charlie Sheen, betting on football and other passing references that barely deserve a chuckle.



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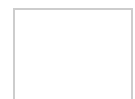
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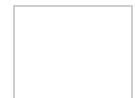
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Sebastian Arcelus and Amy Spanger are both cast to type and coached into giving simulacrum of Ferrell and Deschanel when they play Buddy and Jovie, which doesn't do them or the show any favors. The costumes and sets are ugly and cheap, though to be charitable Gregg Barnes and David Rockwell were probably given pennies and ordered to keep it basic for easy loading and unloading as the show tours town to town. But the songs by Sklar and Beguelin have no such excuse, since a good song is just as easy to sing as a bad one. Or rather, easier.

By the second act, genuine grumpiness had set in. "Nobody Cares About Santa" (a lament by department store Santas) and "Never Fall In Love" (Jovie's big number) aren't exactly good but have a certain peppiness otherwise lacking. The sole example of cleverness is the modest trick of having the chorus open the show on their knees so that Buddy is towering over them up at the North Pole. At the end, when Santa is finally taking off in his sleigh - thanks to everyone embracing the true spirit of Christmas -- it's hardly a surprise to see the contraption lift a few feet off the ground in a rote, mechanical way and just stay there. In this show, even the fake magic can let you down.

#### What others have said:

**Charles Isherwood of the New York Times** said, "The latest seasonal stocking stuffer and pocket picker in the mold of "White Christmas" and "Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas": tinsel in synthetic sentiment, performed with a cheer that borders on mania, and instantly forgettable."

**Elizabeth Vincentelli of the New York Post** gave it 2 1/2 stars out of 4 and said, "Matthew Sklar and Chad Beguelin's score, while efficient, lacks the juice they brought to the underrated "The Wedding Singer." Casey Nicholaw's direction and choreography are similarly restrained, and only rarely summon the inspired mayhem the show needs."

**Joe Dziemianowicz of the New York Daily News** gave it 2 1/2 out of 5 stars and said, "Meant to be the season's big happy hummable holiday event, the show never gets there; it feels unfinished and unready for New York. Director-choreographer Casey Nicholaw's resolutely middling production didn't have a regional tryout, but it could be a touring company that shuffled into town."

**Jeremy Gerard of Bloomberg** gave it 1 1/2 out of 4 stars and said, "Parents hoping to avoid trendy seasonal cynicism may be tempted to lay out \$137 apiece for orchestra seats. Be warned: Your children over 8 years old will never forgive you."

#### **MISTAKES WERE MADE** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

At the Barrow Street Theatre

Oscar-nominated actor Michael Shannon is quickly becoming a talent you don't want to miss in any venue. (If you haven't seen the **terrific indie drama** *Shotgun Stories*, by all means check it out.) In what amounts to an acting class on display, Shannon shines again in a too-familiar look at a theatrical producer (or agent or manager, it doesn't really matter) trying to stay afloat, get a big play off the ground and land a big movie star to anchor it. The script by Craig Wright has fun for a while, even as it trods cliched territory. Shannon is Felix Artifax, a two-bit talent who somehow has his hands on a play about the French Revolution. Felix may be incapable of remembering that the main character is Robespierre, *not* Pierre, but he knows that a movie star in a big part will get this sucker made.

But like any such impresario under inspection, Felix has to have multiple plates spinning. He's got a playwright in the heartland who doesn't want to make changes, a movie star who hates to be put on hold, an ex-wife, a convoy in Afghanistan (or Iraq or somewhere in the Middle East; in any case it really stretches credulity) that he's gambled on to raise funds, and a fish in a tank Felix keeps overfeeding.

His secretary is in the next room (a fine Mierka Girten who doesn't try and inject too much "character" into her part and plays it well) and of course there's the fish (manipulated by a puppeteer), but it's essentially a one-man show. Shannon certainly holds our attention, sinking invisibly into the role but milking every laugh he can out of Felix's desperation. Mildly diverting and a good showcase for Shannon, the play goes drastically off the rails towards the end, with plot twists both absurd and too heavy-handed for this slim drama to bear. The revelations are completely unearned but the applause for Shannon is not.

**What others have said:**

**Charles Isherwood of the New York Times** said, "Despite Mr. Shannon's excellent performance, as meticulously naturalistic in detail as it is vivid in its churning anger and anxiety, "Mistakes Were Made" is only fitfully entertaining and ultimately something of a grind."

**Frank Scheck of the New York Post** gave it 3 stars out of 4 and said, " The play doesn't exactly break any new ground in its satirical look at small-time showbiz, but it's a terrific vehicle for Shannon, who rarely gets to show off his comedic chops."

**Brian Scott Lipton of Theatermania** said, "It must be noted, though, that the work will resonate far more strongly with anyone who works in theater than most of the general public. Moreover, trimming about 15 minutes wouldn't hurt, as the play's sketch-like set-up occasionally becomes apparent. Still, it would be a mistake to miss Mistakes Were Made and the extraordinary performance at its center."

**DEVIL BOYS FROM BEYOND \*\* out of \*\*\*\***

At New World Stages

Even a game cast can't rescue wafer-thin camp about aliens invading a small Florida town in the summer of 1957. Toss in fast-talking journalists a la *His Girl Friday* and you know pretty much everything to expect from this comedy by Buddy Thomas and Kenneth Elliott. In the context of the Fringe Festival (where it began) this was surely a pleasant lark.

But Off Broadway, not even the inestimable talents of Everett Quinton as a slurry, sex-happy housewife can justify this. Paul Pecorino is Mattie Van Buren, a Rosalind Russell type who poses dramatically and italicizes her every speech whenever possible. Peter Cormican is also good as the square-jawed, heavy drinking lover she needs to get the scoop of the century. Aliens, yes ALIENS have landed in Florida, displaced the tired old men of the town and apparently replaced them with super-hot stand-ins.

The modest pleasures on tap here come from the cast doing their best, not the script which isn't even original enough to steal in a shamelessly pleasing manner. The two stars in the rating are for Jeff Riberdy and Jacques Mitchell, who provide the requisite eye candy in a show like this by playing the aliens. Riberdy in particular must be doing sit-ups and push-ups backstage to get himself so ripped for his scenes. A pale imitation of camp won't suffice but a hearty order of beefcake can take the edge of your hunger for genuine laughs.

**What others are saying:**

**Dan Bacalzo of Theatermania** said, "Quinton knows how to wobble a syllable for maximum comic effect,

and his outrageously campy performance is the highlight of the show. Fine work is also done by Pecorino, whose rubbery facial expressions amuse throughout, although the song he sings after Gregory is captured by the aliens is not as well executed as it could be. There are, admittedly, a few moments where the pacing could use a bit of tightening, but overall the 90-minute show is an entertaining diversion."

\*\*\*\*\*

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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**Kaila** 02:26 AM on 11/19/2010

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BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT ABOUT ELF: They didn't write songs that could translate into memorable chestnuts that we'll all cherish for years. Remember when the REAL Broadway used to do that? You could sing "Til there was you" to someone you loved or "Diamonds are a girl's best friend" with you're sister or "All that Jazz" at a talent show?

Now they sing/talk directly from the script (I'm not blaming Sondheim but yes I am). I was kind of

hoping this could have produced another "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" or "We Need a Little Christmas" or "White Christmas". I seriously doubt "Buddy the Elf" is going to find itself in any caroler's sheet music this or any holiday season. Wasted opportunity.

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**3fingerbrown** 12:10 PM on 11/19/2010  
117 Fans



Any wonder that revivals of tuneful shows like South Pacific and Chicago run forever?

B'way audiences are starved for those big, yummy show tunes, but they don't get them in contemporary musicals. What so many of these third-rate Sondheim imitators don't seem to get is that even in his most innovative shows, Sondheim made sure there were moments of pure, beautiful melody, rousing production numbers, and comedy songs that were actually funny.

Don't be too hard on old Steve just because his disciples have failed to fully understand what makes his shows great, or aren't talented enough to write music that is both genuinely melodic and appropriate to the dramatic situation.

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**NHBill** 12:30 PM on 11/17/2010  
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I've seen Pacino on stage twice many, many years ago and the memories are still vivid! First was Brecht's "The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui". Pacino as a 1930's gangster featuring the cast of "Dog Day Afternoon" in a tiny 500 seat theater in Boston. I can still see Pacino's tongue darting in and out and side to side like a psychotic reptile. The second was Richard III on a stark stage at Harvard. I've never been in the same room with anyone as powerfully enthralling as Pacino. If he is on stage near you run to the theater and get your tickets.

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**HUFFPOST BLOGGER**  
**Michael Giltz** 11:49 PM on 11/18/2010  
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You're lucky to have seen him in such intimate settings. But even in a big Broadway house, he's commanding.

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**3fingerbrown** 11:33 AM on 11/19/2010  
117 Fans



I saw him in "Pavlo Hummel" and in his B'way "Richard III," and I know what you mean: It's more than just being a good actor; there's some crazy kind of charisma going on. I once saw Richard Burton in a play, and he had that same aura.

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**youvebeenflagged** 11:58 AM on 11/17/2010  
91 Fans

The actress in the Merchant clip is awful. Looks like an acting school performance.

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