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Theater: "Anastasia" and "Charlie" Offer Empty Calories

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ANASTASIA ** out of ****

CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY ** out of ****

OSLO *** 1/2 out of ****

ANASTASIA ** out of ****

BROADHURST THEATRE

Big budget Broadway musicals seem to have the same creative-sapping power as Hollywood super hero movies. Marvel and DC and others keep hiring hip, smart rising talent or blue chip directors. Yet those talented people keep delivering bland movies that can't approach the quality of work that got them the job and certainly not the charm and imagination of Christopher Reeve in *Superman* or Tobey Maguire's first two *Spider-Man* films. (Those came out in 2002 and 2004 but that seems a century ago in terms of Hollywood's comic book mania.)

Similarly, the new musical *Anastasia* (based on the hit Don Bluth animated film from 1997 *and* the Ingrid Bergman drama from 1956) has a sterling creative team. Lynn Ahrens & Stephen Flaherty did the songs for the animated film and those are all here, with about 16 more they created just for the show (Flaherty also did the score). Terrence McNally did the book and Darko Tresnjak directed. They've all deservedly won Tonys in the past. Here? The result is bland and unexciting. You'll find a few technical flourishes and some very pretty gowns, but it rarely rises above the competent.

Like so many other pre-sold properties, you already know the story. Russian royalty is slaughtered during the Revolution but perhaps — just perhaps — the lovely young Anastasia has survived? It's a myth to keep alive the memory of better days (better for the royals, at least). And yet the child's aging grandmother living in exile in Paris has held onto that myth for decades. She's also offered a substantial reward to anyone who can deliver the lost princess.

A handsome young scamp in St. Petersburg named Dmitry and his older friend “Count” Vlad get a not-so-clever idea. If no one can find the real Anastasia, why not coach someone into playing the part and collect the reward themselves? None of the streetwalkers they audition can pull it off. But a plucky young street sweeper named Anya (who suffers from amnesia) might just fit the bill. They start drilling information into her head about the life of the royal family and she’s a quick study. But my god, she also seems to speak French, knows precisely how to curtsy and has memories of long-lost days filled with champagne and balls and...can it be? No! But... maybe?

Anastasia has some serious sweep — St. Petersburg, Paris, royal balls, palaces, the ballet! — and the show offers some serious spectacle to match. The scenic design by Alexander Dodge has one recurring element: two curved walls with large windows that converge towards the center of the stage. The large windows rotate to suggest a change of scene and it combines with the projection design of Aaron Rhyne to do the bulk of the work in moving us from a palace ballroom to the dirty streets of St. Petersburg to a bureaucratic nightmare of a government building (with filing drawers stretching off into infinity) and so on.

By and large, this conceit works pretty well and is the show’s most interesting creative gambit. It employs a lot of video projection to paint these scenes, using photo-realistic exteriors and interiors and even passing scenery when our heroes are on a train. Usually, video projections on stage make one feel like you’re in a video game or that the producers clearly wanted to save some money. Here those video projections are a lot more expensive and a little more artistically engaging; full credit to all involved. It was however a curious decision to use both photo-realistic imagery *and* at times projections that ape more traditional painted

backdrops. They should have chosen one or the other.

Another plus are the costumes by Linda Cho, which are many and convincing. Anastasia has a frumpy peasant coat during the first half which manages to make its point about her humble state without either being too unflattering or foolishly chic, no easy trick. Our heroine's lovely blue gown at the ballet is a peak, which makes it unfortunate that the more royal red number (complete with bulky tiara) at the finale is far less flattering.

While the animated movie delivered one minor Adult Contemporary hit ("Journey To The Past"), the new additions at best move the plot forward. Only one musical number stands out and that's "The Countess and the Common Man." In it Vlad (John Bolton) and the Countess Lily (a spunky Caroline O'Connor) rekindle an old romance while hamming it up in jokes about how they're not so young anymore. It's typical comic relief for two secondary characters. Since these two offer the only sparks onstage, it's a peak of the show rather than the intended fun diversion. Mary Beth Peil brings what gravitas she can to the Dowager Empress and Ramin Karimloo (so good in the recent revival of *Les Miserables*) is thoroughly wasted as a not-so-menacing villain pledged to off Anastasia. He brings actual menace to one scene with an informer, a moment that is nicely echoed later when he tries to be more friendly with Anastasia. Essentially, he just tags on behind the main actors, popping in once in a while to angrily shake his fist at Russian aristocracy, just so we don't forget he's there.

Similarly, Christy Altomare as Anastasia and Derek Klena as Dmitry (the handsome, square-jawed friend who might just be falling in love with this crazy girl) are both affable presences and sing well. They would look right at home in *Newsies* or *Grease*. However, Klena as the son of an anarchist and Altomare as Russian royalty is a stretch since they both feel so completely all American.

But I don't blame them. They are let down at every stage by a book and score that has no distinctive spin on this oft-told tale. McNally's book in particular bungles the easy dramatic moments built into the story. Anastasia's initial rejection by the Countess as a fraud takes place off-stage. So does Dmitry's confrontation with the Countess when he angrily insists Anastasia had nothing to do with the intended con. And so does Dmitry's later refusal of a reward, the moment when he is essentially declaring his love! And the scene we *do* watch in which Anastasia convinces the Countess of her royal lineage is tepid. It refuses to give her the dramatic moment when Anastasia might proudly refuse to claim she is the long-lost child...thus of course proving her noble intentions. All of this could have been handled in a dozen different ways, but one would certainly want it to happen onstage and with Anastasia risking it all to be true to her heart.

The big showdown the entire plot is pointing towards is simply danced around, a decision as puzzling as the decision to include some faux operatic moments when everyone is singing at the same time, not to mention staging a ballet on stage towards the climax when what we really want is the fireworks of seeing whether Anastasia will be accepted as the lost princess. Also slowing down what should have been a trimmer more propulsive second act was a flashback to happier days and Anastasia's nightmares in which she is haunted by the ghosts of her slaughtered family. The showdown with Karimloo's unfortunately named villain Gleb —

yes, Gleb — is equally anti-climactic.

Not to fear! True love wins out and Anastasia and Dmitry go off to have adventures, rejecting the bourgeois appeal of untold wealth, privilege, pretty clothes and the bosom of her one remaining family member. It's enough to make one suspect Anastasia of proletarian sympathies. But when the proletariat looks like Klena and she gets to ditch that ugly tiara, who can blame her?

CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY ** out of ****

LUNT-FONTANNE THEATRE

Ok, I'm not a big fan of Roald Dahl. I love kids books and the best of them view the world a little askew and have a jaundiced attitude towards adult convention. But Dahl's attitude is a little...nastier. I like to think I'm misanthropic but Dahl was the real thing. Nonetheless, I've read most of his books, loved the Broadway musical *Matilda* and despite its flaws have a fondness for the 1971 Gene Wilder film *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. That movie notably improved on Dahl's book, which itself looks like a masterpiece compared to the lazy nothing of a sequel that is *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, the least of Dahl's output and a tossed-off work that gives new meaning to the phrase "not really trying."

So are we on the same page? I really liked *Matilda*, quite liked the Gene Wilder film, really didn't like the Johnny Depp remake (creepy and not in a good way) and was fully prepared to have some fun at this perhaps inevitable stage version. Sadly, the few elements of the show that work are lifted from the 1971 film (mainly a few songs and the general attitude towards bratty kids). Then they blow the finale by taking out the one thing in the movie that dramatically *improved* on the book. (Dahl hated the change, naturally.)

First the story. Willie Wonka was once one of the world's most famous confectioners. But when spies stole his recipes, Wonka's candy slowed in sales and the great man turned his back on the world, locking himself away in his factory. Charlie is a dirt-poor lad who lives in the same town as Wonka's factory (lucky kid!) and he's just nuts about candy. His grandparents are all bed-ridden, his mom works endless hours just so they can afford to buy half-rotten cabbage and Charlie dreams about his once-a-year purchase of a Wonka bar that the lad makes last as long as possible. (Why am I bothering? You know all this!)

Anyway, Wonka launches a sweepstakes and five lucky kids who discover a golden ticket win a tour of his mysterious factory. Each child is more obnoxious than the last — one is a glutton, another spoiled and so on. Only Charlie seems like a normal, nice kid. Like the movie, the first half of the show is devoted to setting up the story and then introducing each winner, one after the other. They all gather in front of the factory and at the end of Act One, the lucky ones clutching a Golden Ticket are whisked inside and the curtain falls and the audience buzzes with anticipation. In Act Two, we'll enter the chocolate factory and the magic will begin!

We're anticipating magic in Act Two because it isn't there in Act One. The sets by Mark Thompson (who also did the costumes) have been notably modest. The town is evoked by a small cityscape in the background

and the stage has mostly featured the bed for Charlie's grandparents on stage right and a very modest sliver of a candy store on stage left. Clearly, they're saving the fireworks production-wise for Act Two!

They certainly don't waste time with the songs: the show starts with Wonka launching into "The Candy Man" before our story has even begun. Among the show's new songs, we hear the two modest best right here: "A Letter From Charlie Bucket" and his mother's "If Your Father Were Here" (sung by the sweet-voiced Emily Padgett in a forgettable role). They're by Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman, the team behind the musicals *Hairspray* and *Catch Me If You Can*. (Shaiman also wrote the score.) Both songs are minor ballads, scene-setters rather than out and out winners, but they're the best we're gonna get. Of course, we assume this is all just set-up, a slow build to the wild ride of what's about to come!

Then comes Act Two. If there was video of me watching the show, Act Two would show my jaw dropping in astonishment at how under-whelming the sets were. We step inside the factory and it seems to contain one almost bare room. Then we enter the area that the Wilder film handled so charmingly — an entire room made of candy, including a chocolate river! Here it's more of a diorama, a small (*very* small) display almost lost in the middle of the stage. That's it? The film had a door opening up and your eyes popping at the visual scrumptiousness on display. Here it seemed like a tease and you half thought it was a joke and Wonka would pull a lever and then something truly splendiferous would appear. But no. This was followed by a flavor machine room (or some such thing) — all it contained was a large crock pot with three cheap colored plastic tubes stretching to the ceiling. Then came another empty room and then another almost empty room and eventually one poor parent (the redoubtable Jackie Hoffman doing what she could to maintain the interest of

adults) moaned, “It’s the same room!” Or some such thing. The lack of visual pizzazz was almost shocking.

Don’t get me wrong. One of the highlights of the new musical *Groundhog Day* is an extremely low-tech way of presenting a car chase; the audience absolutely loved it. Similarly, I would have loved it if *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* had decided flashy, expensive, lumbering sets spilling out into the auditorium would have been the obvious way to go and by god they weren’t going to do it! Instead, they might have boldly decided to go in the opposite direction and use old school craft and simple but theatrical effects to let the audience use their imagination in clever and satisfying ways.

That’s not what they’ve done. When I say the sets are by and large a giant empty room, I mean precisely that. Like Dahl’s sloppy, almost derisively plotless sequel to the novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, it’s as if they didn’t even try. This is not precisely set designer Thompson’s fault and neither is it likely some budget conscious choice, as my guest imagined when trying to understand what the heck was going on. (“Where’s the set??!!”) This was a creative choice from all involved, including director Jack O’Brien, the producers and Thompson all working together. Why they made such a bizarre choice escapes me.

More problems abound. The episodic nature of the movie is even more apparent onstage and the book by David Greig does nothing to alleviate this. In Act One, we are introduced to each kid one after the other. In Act Two, we enter the factory and in each new room one of the kids obnoxiously ignores all the warnings and suffers a terrible fate. Onstage, most of the group on tour just stands in a clump on one side of the stage and watches what happens and then moves on to the next room. Then it happens again and then again.

Things are livened up by the arrival of the Oompa Loompas (who are indeed presented in a low-tech, satisfying manner that is far and away the highlight of the show), not to mention the other two good songs from the movie: “Pure Imagination” and “The Oompa Loompa Song.”

Still, it’s weird what they get wrong here. Naturally, the effortlessly talented Christian Borle (so good in *Something Rotten!* and *Peter and the Starcatcher*) didn’t want to mimic Gene Wilder’s iconic performance from the film. Unfortunately, that meant avoiding the wicked edge Wilder gave the part — Borle’s Wonka merely feels nice and safe. As with so much of the stagecraft on display, his “transformation” from a rickety old man opening the factory door to the flashily dressed Wonka is shoddily done. (All Wilder needed was a fall transformed into a somersault; here we have a crush of reporters shroud Borle for quite a drawn-out bit of time while he changes outfits.)

But they really drop the ball with Charlie (played nicely on the night I attended by Jake Ryan Flynn). At the very start, Charlie makes an offhand reference to one chocolate bar being more of a ganache, and you think, oh good, they’re going to make Charlie a foodie! Alas, that’s the last moment of any specificity for Charlie.

In the movie, all the Golden Tickets are apparently gone (it turns out one is a forgery). Charlie finds some money in a gutter and being a good-hearted lad and a true fan of the chocolatier, nobly buys a Wonka bar as a gift for his Uncle Joe. (Naturally, it has the winning ticket.) In the show, by contrast, a disguised Wonka

leaves a dollar bill for Charlie to find on the floor of his candy store. (He's closing it for good and won't be back.) Of course, Charlie tries to return it and can't. He then impulsively buys a Wonka bar *for himself* and finds the golden ticket. Mind you, his family is really and truly starving and using a dollar to buy a Wonka bar right after getting one for his birthday is almost unconscionable, especially for such a good kid.

How much more satisfying it would have been if Wonka as the disguised candy store owner had offered Charlie a dollar, only to realize the boy would take it home to his mother. Wonka could have then insisted the dollar was only good for buying candy in his store, thus *forcing* the lad to buy a Wonka bar. Charlie might have magically chosen the winning one out of a pile of bars or Wonka might have arranged it to happen "by accident" or maybe steered him with a nudge to the last available bar forgotten in a dusty corner of the store so something other than greed and a desire to win could have motivated the lad.

Similarly, throughout the tour Charlie might have actually shown some spunk or helped another kid or misbehaved out of adventure or curiosity or *something*. Instead, he's just shepherded around along with everyone else. When one kid called Mike Teavee goes sprawling to the ground right next to Charlie, I couldn't help noticing our hero doesn't even bother to help him up. Again and again, opportunities are missed to develop Charlie and show him growing or being kind or maybe standing up to Wonka when yet another kid seems to get hurt.

And the finale! The film's best conceit (one that annoyed Dahl) was to introduce a spy offering to bribe the kids with untold wealth if they would smuggle out an Everlasting Gobstopper. When Wonka cruelly refuses to give Charlie a lifetime supply of chocolate and sends him packing, the boy nonetheless chooses to leave behind the Gobstopper rather than betray his hero. That moral choice of course proves his worthiness. It's an act of kindness and honesty and the camera's close-up on the piece of candy gently left by Charlie and then the hand of Wonka curling over it and the transformed voice of Wonka when he says, "Charlie!" are the emotional heart of the movie and a big reason it has endured.

In contrast, in the stage version Charlie is briefly left alone with Wonka's scrapbook, a journal in which the great man jots down all his dreams and ideas. Wonka sternly tells Charlie not to look inside it. Every other time someone has broken the rules, they've suffered horribly. Here Charlie breaks the rules but for some reason this time it's alright and Wonka gives him the entire factory!

It's a bizarre final twist: instead of Charlie bravely doing right, he betrays the trust of Wonka. Sure, it's a harmless peek into the man's journal of ideas. But since Wonka locked out the world and sank into despair years ago after spies stole his ideas, you can see how that sneaking a look at his storehouse of ideas might be a sore spot. Yet this betrayal is exactly the proof Wonka wanted before making Charlie his heir?

One can imagine fumbling the end to a new show. But when an excellent and clear ending has already been mapped out for you, avoiding it seems perverse. And for the final indignity, you can't even buy a Wonka bar in the lobby.

Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

The Liar *** 1/2

Jitney *** 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) *** 1/2

Significant Other * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) ** (third visit, but *** if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) ** 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) *** 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) ****

The Light Years * 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) *** 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips **

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) *

Come From Away *

Miss Saigon **

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba * 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s **

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) ***

Latin History For Morons * 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal ***

The Antipodes **

Anastasia **

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory **

Oslo *** 1/2

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