

LEARN HOW TO BE HAPPIER AT WORK—TODAY

themuse

HUFF
POST

The Third Metric

Delivered straight
to your inbox

SIGN UP
FOR A FREE CLASS

This is the print preview:
[Back to normal view »](#)

April 29, 2014

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Theater: *Annie* Still Plucky; *The Heiress* Still Plain

Posted: 11/12/2012 6:30 pm

ANNIE ** 1/2 out of ****

THE HEIRESS ** out of ****

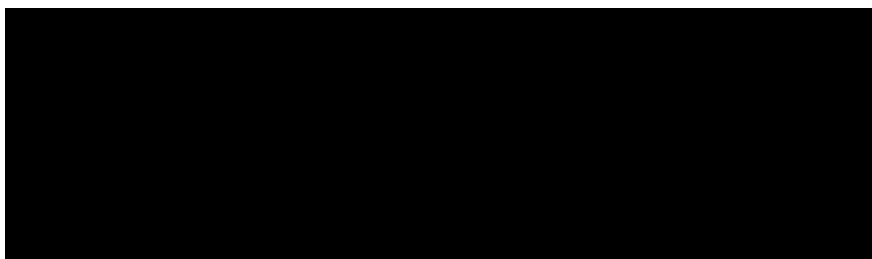
ANNIE ** 1/2 out of ****

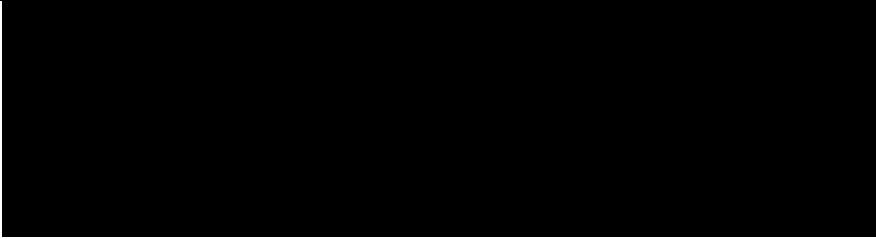
PALACE THEATRE

Annie has great timing. I don't just mean the fact that this revival of the smash hit musical features a new president with a New Deal and a New York City on the skids but ready to bounce back with optimism and determination. Sure, that makes this *Annie* feel very welcome. But the even smarter timing is that it's opening on Broadway now and can establish itself as a family-friendly hit before that UK import *Matilda The Musical* comes thundering in next March armed to the teeth with rave reviews, big box office and major awards. Both girls are scrappy fighters and both can survive on Broadway. But having seen this *Annie*, it's lucky to have some breathing room.

The story is familiar even though I've never seen the musical performed live or read the comic strip. Plucky little girl escapes depressing orphanage, befriends a dog named Sandy, wins the love of the richest man in the world and sings "Tomorrow." Perhaps the biggest shock to someone familiar with only the leaden feature film version is how many other terrific songs are packed into the show. You've got the sweet "Maybe," the rousing "It's a Hard Knock Life," the show-stopper "Little Girls," "Easy Street," "You're Never Fully Dressed Without a Smile" AND "Tomorrow," plus a few others. The songs by Charles Strouse and Martin Charnin have a Jerry Herman-esque by-god-you're-going-to-remember-me quality that is rare these days and they are sung well by most everyone involved. If you're headed to *Annie*, it's because of these songs, and no wonder.

An earlier revival was apparently rather woebegone but this show feels much more solid. The cast is generally strong and the two leads are very good. It's in the varied tech elements that this *Annie* fails to capitalize fully on its rock-solid virtues. But don't blame the actors. Lilla Crawford is a trooper as Annie, belting out her numbers with precision while hitting her mark and keeping Sandy in his place. (The performance I saw, Sandy yawned during "Tomorrow" and thought he might wander off but Crawford kept him close without ever breaking character.) I've no idea if she'll make the transition to a full career but she certainly has the pipes and poise, sounding in this interview like a veteran.





Even better is Anthony Warlow as Daddy Warbucks. He brings a warmth and emotional depth to both his character and his singing that gives Annie a genuine heart. An Australian star, I'm sure we'll be seeing him again in other roles. Katie Finneran has less luck as Miss Hannigan. She scored a triumph and a Tony for *Promises, Promises* but here she avoids the cartoonish over-the-top side of the villainess head of the orphanage and goes for something more real and vulnerable in its way. It's a reasonable choice and she certainly nails many of her lines but without a real bad person to hiss at (we never think for a moment that she'd actually harm Annie) the show has no danger. That's certainly not on display via her brother Rooster (a fine but not scary Clarke Thorell).

The casting is not the problem. Brynn O'Malley is a prim assistant to Warbucks but the potential romance between her and her employer barely registers. And the gang of orphans is solid as well. The little girls all dance and sing with aplomb; the Bowery Boys accents are a little thick in the first scene but they soon settle down into reasonable roles.

No, the reason this *Annie* is merely pleasant instead of joyful is the creative team led by generally dependable director James Lapine. To their credit, the show does not have a sickly sweet aura about it. That is probably an eternal issue with this show; you can't have FDR telling a little girl her attitude is exactly what the country needs right now without expecting a little schmaltz. But in general, the show has no momentum. Without a Miss Hannigan to fear (or at least chew up the scenery) and with Daddy Warbucks warming up to Annie about two seconds after she arrives, there's essentially no story to tell.

Worse, the choreography by Andy Blankenbuehler has an anonymous quality about it. In the big number "N.Y.C." the stage just feels crowded, not bustling with life as it should. The costumes by Susan Hilferty are more spot-on, and she certainly doesn't mess with the iconic red dress towards the end.

But the scenic design by David Korins is another missed opportunity. The orphanage "folds" out from one side of the stage like the page in a picture book. That idea is carried over to the Warbucks mansion where a tour of the house involves "turning" part of the set like turning pages in a book to go from room to room. It might seem churlish to point out that Annie is a comic book and not a picture book so this conceit is out of place. Okay, I'll accept the story has a fairy-tale aspect but this is about the only idea of the show. And that mansion is an ugly, crowded busy set with stairs moving this way and that and fat pillars getting in the way. When Annie first sees it she says it seems more like the lobby of an hotel than a place people live. She's meant to sound overwhelmed but in fact she sounds discerning. It does look like the lobby of an hotel, albeit an ugly and unimpressive one. I hoped the mansion might transform itself and become warmer and prettier as Annie's influence is felt but no such luck. The Christmas tree of lights? Yep, that looks exactly like something a hotel lobby might feature when what a little girl wants is a real tree.

Happily, when the cast is belting out songs and Crawford and Warlow have center stage, you can ignore all that and focus on what is indeed a very impressive clutch of songs and two winning performers. It may be a hard knock life next March for this show, but for the moment when they're singing their songs the faults of this production seem far less important.

THE HEIRESS ** out of ****
WALTER KERR THEATRE

When I heard about this revival of *The Heiress* starring actress Jessica Chastain, I immediately thought it was horrible casting. That striking film actress, so good in movies like *Tree of Life* and *Take Shelter*, trying to embody the plain Jane known as Catherine Sloper? Absurd. It turns out I was right but for the wrong reason. This isn't Michelle Pfeiffer in *Frankie & Johnny*: Chastain can indeed frump herself down and at least "feel" unattractive (a very frizzy wig helps quite a bit). Unfortunately, Chastain simply doesn't have the vocal chops for Broadway yet, over-emphasizing her lines or delivering them in too broad a manner that hammers home the laughs or misses the mark entirely at times. She has some confident moments, especially when simply reacting to what is said (not a surprise for someone who has flourished on film) but it will take more experience on her part to determine whether her talents are suited to the stage. And without that burning central performance, *The Heiress* has almost no reason for being.



Inspired by the Henry James novel, this play involves the timid, shy Catherine, the daughter of a widowed doctor (David Strathairn) who constantly compares his child to the beloved wife that died while giving birth. Needless to say, the child is found lacking. She longs for her father's approval and isn't surprised that no one else ever pays attention to her. That makes the arrival of the handsome and seemingly impulsive Morris Townsend (a pleasant Dan Stevens) all the more shocking. He is quite the most eligible bachelor around (if you don't mind penniless young men with pretty faces), so his whirlwind wooing of Catherine fools no one but the poor creature herself.

Her Aunt Lavinia (a very good Judith Ivey) suspects Morris is enraptured with Catherine's wealth as much as anything else, but like the other practical women in the play, so what? He might enjoy her money and make Catherine happy at the same time, so where's the harm? But her father is too pitiless in his attitude towards her: He doesn't love her, so no one could love her, and this fortune hunter isn't going to make a fool of him.

I love the 1949 feature film version starring Olivia de Havilland, Ralph Richardson and Montgomery Clift. It's one of the all-time greats and improves in subtle ways even on the stage play. Comparing it to this production is instructive. De Havilland is a rather plain-looking movie star at the best of times so it's very easy for her to inhabit the mousy Catherine. Chastain can't be that plain but this adds a complexity they might have mined further. If Catherine isn't that plain, it makes the idea a young man might be attracted to her just for herself more plausible. (Catherine does exhibit smarts and an appealing bluntness at times.) Richardson is the definitive father, biting sarcasm and almost cruel in his treatment of his daughter; it's like watching a man kick a puppy. Strathairn is very different, choosing to shade his take on the doctor. He's rather old and infirm from the start of the show and his clumsy comments are wounding but you can almost think he's trying to help. And I pity any actor who has to be compared to Clift. When you're matched up against one of the most beautiful actors of all time, you're going to come up short. (Leonardo Di Caprio in *Titanic* or Alain Delon in *Purple Noon* might not suffer; few else.) Stevens needless to say is not the Byronic beauty that was Clift. But again, this offered opportunity. Might Morris just be a hapless, well-intentioned fellow? Sure he likes her

money but his lack of work might just be because he's ill-suited to it and perhaps what he's suited to most is enjoying Catherine's wealth and keeping her company. Better that than she live alone, no? Unfortunately, no new insight into Morris is offered; he seems like a straightforward cad looking to dupe a girl and get her money.

All of these shadings and possibilities fall by the wayside, I'm afraid, with Chastain emphasizing her lines and losing all subtlety time and again. She's done stage work before and might blossom with time (or even by the end of the run, perhaps) but at this moment seems to be taking the broadest choices possible. She's certainly not bad or embarrassing, and it's no reflection on her skills in the movies. Ivey shows her and everyone else how it's done as the silly but somehow sensible Aunt Lavinia. The costumes by Albert Wolsky are strong, the hair and wig designs by Paul Huntley work wonders especially with Chastain and the set by Derek McLane is handsome. The staircase rises up inevitably to the second floor landing for that dramatic finale, but unfortunately the drama doesn't rise with it.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) ****

Chimichangas And Zoloft *

Closer Than Ever ***

Cock ** 1/2

Harvey with Jim Parsons *

My Children! My Africa! ****

Once On This Island ***

Potted Potter *

Storefront Church ** 1/2

Title And Deed ***

Picture Incomplete (NYMF) **

Flambe Dreams (NYMF) **

Rio (NYMF) **

The Two Month Rule (NYMF) *

Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2

Stealing Time (NYMF) **

Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2

Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ***

Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2

How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2

Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***

Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2

Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2

Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2

Living With Henry (NYMF) *

A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2

The Last Smoker In America **

Gore Vidal's The Best Man (w new cast) ***

Into The Woods at Delacorte ** 1/2

Bring It On: The Musical **

Bullet For Adolf *

Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc. **

Harrison, TX ***

Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck" (FringeNYC) * 1/2

Pink Milk (FringeNYC) * 1/2

Who Murdered Love (FringeNYC) no stars

Storytime With Mr. Buttermen (FringeNYC) **

#MormonInChief (FringeNYC) **

An Interrogation Primer (FringeNYC) ***

An Evening With Kirk Douglas (FringeNYC) *

Sheherizade (FringeNYC) **

The Great Pie Robbery (FringeNYC) ** 1/2

*Independents (FringeNYC) *** 1/2*
*The Dick and The Rose (FringeNYC) ***
*Magdalen (FringeNYC) ****
*Bombsheltered (FringeNYC) ** 1/2*
*Paper Plane (FringeNYC) ** 1/2*
*Rated M For Murder (FringeNYC) ** 1/2*
*Mallory/Valerie (FringeNYC) **
*Non-Equity: The Musical! (FringeNYC) **
*Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame (FringeNYC) *** 1/2*
*City Of Shadows (FringeNYC) ****
*Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking ****
*Salamander Starts Over (FringeNYC) ****
*Pieces (FringeNYC) **
*The Train Driver ****
*Chaplin The Musical * 1/2*
*Detroit ** 1/2*
*Heartless at Signature ***
*Einstein On The Beach at BAM *****
*Red-Handed Otter ** 1/2*
*Marry Me A Little ***
*An Enemy Of The People ** 1/2*
*The Old Man And The Old Moon *** 1/2*
*A Chorus Line at Papermill ****
*Helen & Edgar ****
*Grace * 1/2*
*Cyrano de Bergerac ***
*Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? ****
*Disgraced ***
*Annie ** 1/2*
*The Heiress ***
*Checkers ** 1/2*
*Ivanov ****
*Golden Child at Signature ** 1/2*
*Giant at the Public *** 1/2*
*Scandalous * 1/2*
*Forever Dusty ***
*The Performers ***
*The Piano Lesson at Signature *** 1/2*
*Un Ballo In Maschera at the Met *** 1/2 (singing) * (production) so call it ** 1/2*
*A Christmas Story: The Musical ***
*The Sound Of Music at Papermill ****
*My Name Is Asher Lev *** 1/2*
*Golden Boy ***
*A Civil War Christmas ** 1/2*
*Dead Accounts ***
*The Anarchist **
*Glengarry Glen Ross ***
*Bare ***
*The Mystery Of Edwin Drood ** 1/2*
*The Great God Pan ** 1/2*

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 for 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 is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that

he will be writing a review.

Follow Michael Giltz on Twitter: www.twitter.com/michaelgiltz