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Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted: March 25, 2011 02:40 AM



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Theater: "Arcadia" Revival Delights

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ARCADIA *** 1/2 out of ****

ETHEL BARRYMORE THEATRE

What a marvelous play! That's my first reaction after seeing the new revival of **Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* on Broadway**. I loved the original production in 1995 and was eager to see it again. Why did we have to wait 16 years? And where are the regular revivals of *The Invention Of Love*? I can understand the hesitation in tackling the epic *Coast Of Utopia*. But it shouldn't be just *The Real Thing* that gets revived again and again, as the sparkling *Jumpers* proved a few years ago.

Time and reputation can play tricks on you. So many people tell you how heady and intellectual Stoppard is that you forget how delightful and entertaining his shows are. Like all great artists, whatever theories or ideas are embedded in the work, it all comes easily to life because at heart Stoppard cares about characters, not concepts.

Here we have some of his best. The entire show is set in a stately home. In 1809, we enjoy the shenanigans of Septimus (an excellent Tom Riley). He's the tutor of the astonishingly brilliant Thomasina (the also..oh, they're almost all very good, in this case, it's Bel Powley). But Septimus is also wooing Lady Croom (Margaret Colin) while diddling with the unseen wife of the hapless poet Ezra Chater (David Turner).

In the present, the home is peopled with the scholar Hannah (Lia Williams), who is researching a book on the history of the home's garden, a notable item in the history of such things. The rather flashy and over-eager to publish scholar Bernard (Billy Crudup) also rushes in, hungry for fame and ready to jump

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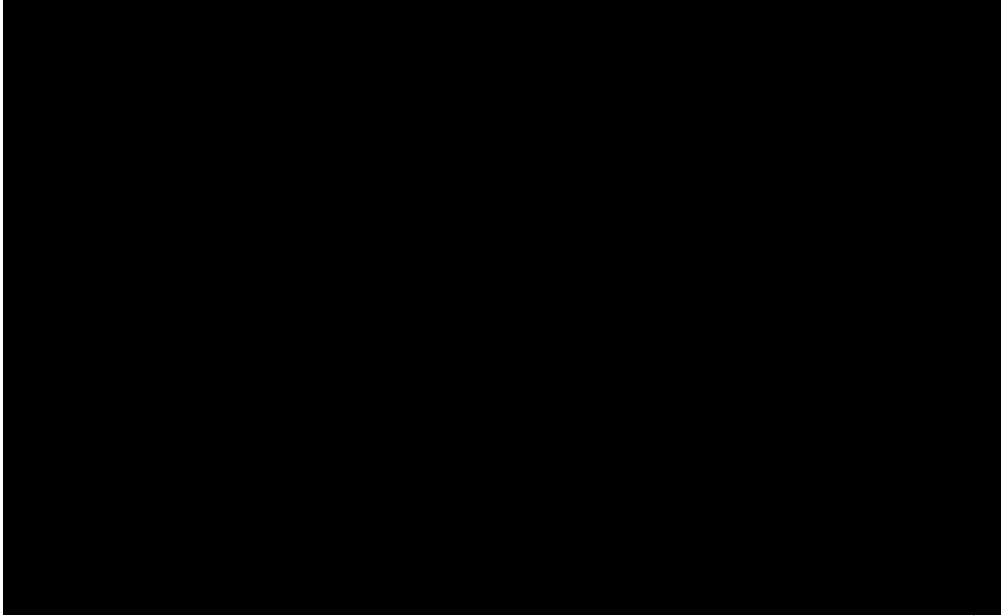
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on any evidence that Lord Byron stayed at the home and killed poor Ezra. Bernard dallies with the silly daughter of the home's owners (Grace Gummer, the only one who captures the self-satisfied, slightly childish air of the nobility) while Hannah is desired by Chloe's brother Valentine (Raul Esparza, moving as always), who is working on his own academic work using the information in the estate's centuries of records on hunting.

Here's Esparza talking about the show in an interview with *Show People*.



There you have it. Romantic entanglements ping off the romance of ideas and insights. Young Thomasina is a frightfully clever child, though clever doesn't really capture it. She's a genius really, just coming into her own, though in the present we learn that she died in a tragic fire right around her 17th birthday. The great pleasure of the play is watching Septimus juggle the adult women in his life while slowly falling in love with the mind and heart of Thomasina as she comes of age. Thomasina, we can see, has loved him from the start, though she will go on and on about Lord Byron.

Equally delightful is the exchange of ideas. Lady Croom is distraught over the radical changes being done to her grounds by the designer Noakes (Byron Jennings), all in the name of the latest craze in landscape, the "picturesque." In the present, one of the comedic high points occurs when Bernard reads aloud his paper touting his "discovery" of new info on Byron, with Hannah and Valentine dropping in caustic jibes at every turn. Academic standards, the political and social symbolism of a hedge, Fermat's Last Theorem -- it's all in there. Never fear. The original Playbill had three essays (about gardens, Byron and Fermat) that helped ease any nerves. They're useful to read if you're seeing the show ([you can get a PDF here](#)), but not necessary. You'll follow perfectly well what's going on; the essays just let you get your footing right away.

Crudup is especially fine. I think Victor Garber captured the more scheming, manipulative side of academia (at least in my shaky memory of his marvelous work in 1995). But Crudup emphasizes the charm of Bernard. He may be sloppy on dotting his "i"s and crossing his "t"s but he just wants to get on the telly. Whatever magic Crudup has that isn't always captured on film clearly comes to life on the stage; our gain. Williams as his foil Hannah is his equal and a real find to those of us in America not familiar with her work. So is Riley and Powley and all the other members of the original UK revival that made the journey to New York.

Caveats? The British accents of the American cast are shaky at best. Gummer has the least interesting role and does little with it, despite her success in capturing the spoiled but not rude nature of the pampered. The mute Gus (Noah Robbins, quite good in his modern role) is saddled with a rather jarring, noisy shirt in his first scene that distracts. The music cue towards the very end (our characters in the past are somehow hearing modern music from the present while waiting for a waltz) is somehow not quite right. And that's it.

The set and lighting are subtle and true, the direction by David Leveaux spot-on. And above all you



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remember the play, the talent of **Stoppard**. You remember the way characters from different eras are suddenly on stage at the same time, bouncing off and circling around each other like subatomic particles. And that waltz at the end, where it somehow, magically comes together -- the art, the math, the love, the innocence, the past and the present. Let's hope we don't have to wait 16 years to see **Arcadia** again.

THE 2010-2011 THEATER SEASON (ratings on a four star system)

Angels in America revival at Signature *** out of ****
Arcadia with Billy Crudup *** 1/2
Between Worlds/Entre Mundos * 1/2
Beautiful Burnout at St. Ann's Warehouse **
Blood From A Stone ** 1/2
The Broadway Musicals Of 1921 at Town Hall ***
Devil Boys From Beyond **
The Diary Of A Madman with Geoffrey Rush at BAM ***
Double Falsehood **
The Dream Of The Burning Boy ** 1/2
Driving Miss Daisy **
Elf *
Elling **
A Free Man Of Color ** 1/2
Gatz ***
Ghetto Clown ***
Good People with Frances McDormand **
The Grand Manner **
The Great Game ***
Gruesome Playground Injuries ***
The Hallway Trilogy: Nursing **
The Hallway Trilogy: Paraffin ***
The Hallway Trilogy: Rose ***
The Importance Of Being Earnest ** 1/2
The Interminable Suicide Of Gregory Church *** 1/2
John Gabriel Borkman * 1/2
La Bete ** 1/2
Les Miserables ***
Lombardi **
Macbeth with John Douglas Thompson **
The Merchant Of Venice *** 1/2
Middletown ***
The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore *
Mistakes Were Made ** 1/2
Nixon In China *** 1/2
The New York Idea **
The Nightingale and Other Short Fables at BAM ***
Other Desert Cities **
Our Town with Helen Hunt ***
The Pee-wee Herman Show ***
The Road To Qatar *
Room ***
The Scottsboro Boys ****
Small Craft Warnings zero stars
Three Sisters (w Maggie Gyllenhaal and Peter Sarsgaard) *** 1/2
Timon Of Athens at Public with Richard Thomas ***
The Whipping Man **
Wings **
Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown **

AT THE NEW YORK MUSICAL FESTIVAL

Blood Ties ***
Fellowship * 1/2
Fingers and Toes ** 1/2



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Antoine Dodson Arrested For Marijuana Possession

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Frog Kiss *** 1/2
 The Great Unknown ** 1/2
 Nighttime Traffic **
 Our Country *
 PopArt *
 Shine! The Horatio Alger Musical ** 1/2
 Show Choir **
 Tess: The New Musical **
 Trav'lin' ***
 Without You *** 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 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 tickets to the show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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

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