



Theater: "Babes In Toyland" Amuses, "Groundhog Day" Needs A Do-Over



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BABES IN TOYLAND \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

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CARNEGIE HALL

The MasterVoices series at Carnegie Hall has the purity of intent that Encores has lost forever. Too often, shows mounted by Encores feel the pressure of being dry runs for Broadway revivals. Even if that's not the intent, the semi-staged productions have caught fire enough times to make that high stakes question loom over every performance.

In contrast, the concert productions of shows at Carnegie Hall are just that – celebrations of musical theater at its best with only the pleasure of the moment as its goal. Not that the quality is ever lacking – the concert production of *Guys & Dolls* with Nathan Lane and Megan Mullally could have transferred to Broadway in a heartbeat, no sets needed. Encores can match the carefree fun of MasterVoices only when dealing with something hopelessly obscure like its recent presentation of Cole Porter's *New Yorkers*. That's quite unlikely to ever get a proper revival.

And no one – I mean, *no one* – is ever going to give a fully staged revival to the cockamamie nonsense that was the original spectacle of *Babes In Toyland* from 1903. Victor Herbert's most beloved work was an extravaganza in its day, filled with shipwrecks and volcanoes and an acid trip of a storyline that stretched out the evening to four hours. While the work has somehow been neutered into holiday fare by Laurel & Hardy and others, the real *Babes In Toyland* is a lot weirder. Instead of a lovable Santa Claus-like figure, it actually features a maniacal toymaker dabbling in the black arts so he can imbue his presents with tortured souls and have them slaughter all the little boys and girls in the world. Merry Christmas!

That's just one of many revelations to be found when looking at the original book of this show, which also

includes the usual novelty numbers, a cast of literally hundreds (“Mostly girls!” promised the original poster), an uncle trying to kill off his niece and nephew, a widow marrying her daughter’s fiancé, giant spiders, hired assassins, a friendly bear, lengthy musical interludes and much, much, much, much more. Put it on today and its budget would make *Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark* seem like a safe bet.

So what do you do with this bloated, absurdist farce of a show? You laugh, bring on a game cast and let the Orchestra Of St. Luke’s deliver the music beautifully. Oh and get Blair Brown to pop in and deliver the droll narration that is half story-telling and half history lesson and always amusing. By and large, it works.



PHOTO BY ERIN BAIANO

Blair Brown (seated) and Kelli O’Hara in performance during MasterVoice’s “Babes In Toyland”

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Sitting far in the back of the jewel that is Carnegie Hall, the evening proved less than the sum of its parts. The singing was grand but the clowning was too far away to appreciate. However, I should stress that friends with much better seats and able to actually see the actors strut their stuff had a much better time. A discerning pair, they praised the acting, from the little asides of the main performers to the chemistry between the leads and the chorus and pretty much everyone right down the line. Most of the songs were novelties or just this side of novelty, but the cast milked them for all their worth. It’s a good reminder of how intimate theater should be and so rarely is for most of the audience. So at Carnegie Hall, remember: you can sit anywhere and

enjoy the sound of glorious music-making and singing. But if you need to see the faces of the people performing — and even a casual concert production like this benefits from actually being able to see the actors — the closer, the better.

Like many, I was lured by the rare chance to hear a full accounting of this signal work. (It marked a step towards *Show Boat* and the American musical as we know it, in part because Herbert insisted his work be heard as written and that any changes must be approved by him.) Oh, and Kelli O'Hara. When she clopped out in some ridiculously high heels during the first act and her voice soared through the room and suddenly the orchestra and giant choir that sounded so loud a moment ago now seemed to recede into the background, you were reminded with a jolt what a talent she has.

Still, her role wasn't very interesting and barely the lead, if that. The true star of the night was Christopher Fitzgerald, who had a field day donning various costumes, mugging, singing multiple nonsense numbers with aplomb, doing his best silent comedy gag opposite Bill Irwin as the evil toymaker and probably about ten other things I missed. If we had the British tradition of the holiday panto, Fitzgerald would already be a beloved legend who worked from November to January every year until the day he died...and then they'd prop his body up onstage and he'd somehow get more laughs one way or another.

Blair Brown was such a welcome, wry presence, out of respect I didn't stalk the stage door and pester her with the question she gets asked every day: when can we buy a boxed set of *The Days & Nights Of Molly Dodd*? Or at least stream it? Seeing Chris Sullivan as a game second banana doing some good physical gags reminded me how desperate I am to see the musical *Hadestown* again. (Fingers crossed for a Broadway transfer.) Lauren Worsham was a treat and sounded great as Jane. And Jay Armstrong Johnson is such a triple threat — he's been terrific in pure drama like *Wild Animals You Should Know*, has leading man dash, a comic's gift for gentle self-mockery, sings charmingly and dances to boot — that I am torn between wanting to support his TV show *Quantico* because he's got a recurring role and wishing it would end so he could return to theater full time.

Ted Sperling directed with economy and conducted well (when allowed to do so without distraction from the actors). And the glue that held it all together was the nimble adaptation by Sperling and Joe Keenan. Keenan also wrote the concert script and some additional lyrics. If you're not familiar with him, Keenan is a multiple Emmy winner for his work on the sitcom *Frasier* and has penned three wonderfully funny screwball novels, beginning with *Blue Heaven* in 1988. Somehow, Keenan has never worked on a Broadway musical, which is absurd. Even more mysterious is the fact that the perfectly paced *Blue Heaven* has never been adapted into a film or a play or even the frothy musical comedy it is clearly destined to be. At the very least, he could write another novel.

NOTE: The evening began when Sperling announced the launch of The Roger Rees Fund, which will help encourage the growth of musical theater and programs like MasterVoices, which the actor was involved with for many years. [Head here](#) for more information.

GROUNDHOG DAY \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

## AUGUST WILSON THEATRE

*Groundhog Day* the movie is a gem. It features Bill Murray's best performance and a screenplay of such precise cleverness it leaves other screenwriters speechless with admiration. I love it too, but I don't feel precious or protective of it. If you're going to turn *Groundhog Day* into a musical (and why not?), you're going to have to make it your own.

That's exactly what the team behind this Olivier-winning Best Musical has done. Unfortunately, the subtly different tone they strike is wrong, most of the songs by Tim Minchin are unmemorable, they drain the central romance of any interest and leading man Andy Karl may be just-this-side-of-stardom but he's also fatally miscast. The fact that it still kind of works is a testament to the powerful lure of the original story and the craft and talent of all involved.

A modern film classic, *Groundhog Day* tells the story of Phil Connors, a local weatherman who longs for the jump to a bigger market. He's so over the piddling assignments given to him, like trudging to the small town of Punxsutawney for the annual tradition of waiting for a groundhog to predict six more weeks of winter or an early spring. Phil will do it, but not with any good grace.

In the film he's a snob, disdainful of the homey accommodations he's stuck in and desperate to leave. But a storm keeps everyone off the highway for a day and Phil is trapped in this miserable little town, treating everyone rudely and waiting anxiously for the next morning when...he can do it all over again?

Somehow, Phil gets trapped in a loop, repeating this same day over and over again, apparently until he gets it right. But what does that mean? Doing whatever he wants, exploring the possibilities of living forever (Phil literally can't die), bedding his attractive female producer (Barrett Doss) or – gulp – actually falling in love with his female producer and winning her heart in return. If Phil gets it wrong, he can always try again the next day – which is the same day – and apparently will be forever.

This premise is explored to perfection in the film but the challenges of doing it onstage are many. In a movie, a quick montage can get across the idea of days repeating and repeating, such as Phil taking months of piano lessons just so he can magically play like a pro at just the right moment. But onstage, this means Phil is seated at a piano as it slides across the stage in real time. First he taps away like a kid, then he gets a little better and better still until the fourth time he's playing like Vladimir Horowitz. Unfortunately, this has to physically happen – you can't just cut, cut, cut like in an editing room. A good song might paper over this problem of timing (and in comedy, timing is everything). Unfortunately, the songs by Minchin rarely deliver. Some had the same reservation about *Matilda*, Minchin's earlier Broadway hit. I didn't; those songs got the job done and one or two of them popped enough to keep me humming them later. Still, the songs of *Matilda* were supportive rather than the star. Here they fall short.

That lack isn't helped in any way with the book by Danny Rubin. It tries to leave its own stamp on the story and falters. First, there's a notable strain of sourness – the film is rated PG but this stage show tosses in a number of random curse words that feel like a lame attempt to seem edgy and adult. Instead, they upset the romantic, gentle tone of the comedy further knocked out of joint by Phil dumping a woman right after meaningless sex, indulging in a threesome (or foursome?), doing drugs and so on. The vibe given off is just a tad too sleazy.

This extends to the comic montage where Phil feels trapped forever and tries to kill himself but wakes up again the "next" morning no matter what he does. It's jokey in the film, including a scene where he drives off a cliff with the groundhog Punxsatawney Phil by his side. Onstage, they include some of this silliness (like tossing a toaster into a bathtub) but they also show Phil shooting himself in the head with a pistol -- after plugging the groundhog in the chest with that same pistol. It's far more personal and gruesome somehow and just doesn't work in comic terms. It's supposed to be the we-can-top-this finale to the mayhem but it's just too "real" to be funny the same way driving off a cliff with a squealing groundhog can be. All these bits are scattered throughout the show but the cumulative effect is unpleasant and out of sync with a story that yearns to be romantic and redemptive.

In the film, Phil is rather specifically a snob – mocking a woman's inability to make a cappuccino by derisively saying she can't even spell it. Onstage, he just seems like a generic jerk. Worst of all, in the film the producer played by Andie MacDowell has a sense of humor and a sparring sort of chemistry with Phil. Onstage, the producer Rita is more blandly nice and doesn't display any rapport with Phil, not even the battling,

Tracy/Hepburn sort that one knows will lead to love. She seems like a pushover and Rita's one revealing number paints her as a helpless damsel stuck in old stereotypes about love.

But the biggest problem is Andy Karl. He's 43 years old, exactly the same age as Bill Murray was when the film came out — which shocked me. I would have guessed Karl was much younger. Let's face it — Bill Murray embodied a grumpy old man even at 23 years old. Besides, 43 is a lot younger today than it was some 25 years ago. No one can have the built-in affection and goodwill that Murray earned leading up to that film. (Though Karl does benefit from the goodwill engendered by an injury that has him performing onstage in a leg brace.) Murray walks into a room and we know whom we're dealing with.

More to the point, Murray was never a ladies' man. When he tried to hit on women, the joke was always on him, intentionally so. He may have been smarmy and a jerk, but his smarminess was toothless. Not so, Andy Karl. He's an honest to goodness leading man, with chiseled looks and a fit body displayed to the nines in the musical *Rocky*. When this guy aggressively hits on a woman, it feels frat boy/date rapey, not the harmless and easily dispensed with clumsiness that Bill Murray embodied. Karl is good looking enough that when he beds a woman and then kicks her out of his room the moment he's through, it makes you root against him.

Bill Murray's Phil learns to be a better person. Andy Karl's Phil just gets bored after trying everything else and seems to decide what the heck, he might as well try romance. It wouldn't fix the show's many problems, but imagining someone in the role like Norbert Leo Butz or Nathan Lane (or I guess Josh Gad if you go younger?) would give the entire show a different and better vibe.

Nonetheless, the essential appeal of the story comes through. What if you could go back and deliver that zinger of a line you thought of only *after* the other person walked away? What if you could do that first date all over again, learn from your mistakes and get it just right? What if you could be a better person? The lure of a do-over is powerful. And Karl is good enough even with the roadblocks in his way to make you sort of root for this guy once he finally stops being such a dick. Doss's character Rita may be devoid of any telling detail or interest, but Doss brings a wholesome appeal to the producer anyway.

And for one delirious comic number, the sly humor Minchin displayed in *Matilda* and the talent of the technical team led by director Matthew Warchus come together. It's the song "Nobody Cares." Phil wanders into a bar because he's hit the moment in the show where he realizes he can do whatever he wants and never pay the price. (The moment where he realizes that's not a lot of fun comes later.) He can eat all he wants and never get fat. He can refuse to exercise but still remain fit. And he can drink and drink and never wake up with a hangover. So Phil enters the bar and sits next to Gus (Andrew Call) and Ralph (Raymond J. Lee) and they start to sing.

The joys here are many. First, the vocal arrangement is a treat; just the sound of three men harmonizing in an offbeat style brought a smile to the audience. (Lee's little trills are especially amusing.) Then they toss in a dash of home-made percussion, just the guys tapping on glasses and the like in a way that feels natural and spontaneous. Then they go big, with the three guys going for a wild car ride. (Phil knows he can't die so what

does he care?)

Here the show displays a car chase complete with police sirens and a big crash at the end — and it's all done via a low-tech approach that had the audience almost speechless with delight. The song built and built with more and more suicide attempts (including the unfortunate pistol one). A little misdirection seemed to show Phil heading off the stage or up a ladder and then suddenly popping up in bed or some other unexpected place. They did it with old school tricks, but the simple nature of these tricks sent a thrill through the crowd, which should be a lesson to any shows bedazzled by the latest high tech wizardry.

Unlike the movie, I've no desire to live the musical Phil's day all over again. But if I could watch just that big number towards the end of Act One? Sign me up. Sometimes you want to relive a moment not to fix it, but just to savor the time when everything went right.

## 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



The Little Foxes \*\*

Groundhog Day \*\* 1/2

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***Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.***