

Meet Candy Spelling

Candy at Last
Discussion / Book Signing



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April 30, 2014

HUFF
POST ENTERTAINMENT

Theater: 'Bare'-ly Catholic; A Too 'Civil' Christmas; Decent 'Drood'

Posted: 12/15/2012 2:22 pm

BARE ** out of ****

A CIVIL WAR CHRISTMAS ** 1/2 out of ****

THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD ** 1/2 out of ****

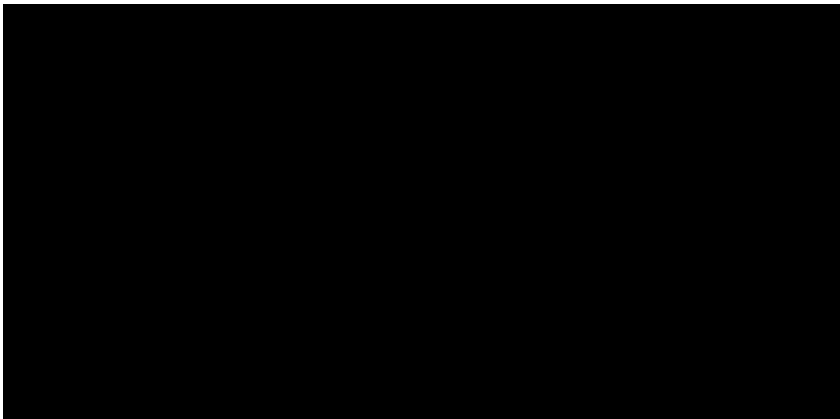
BARE ** out of ****

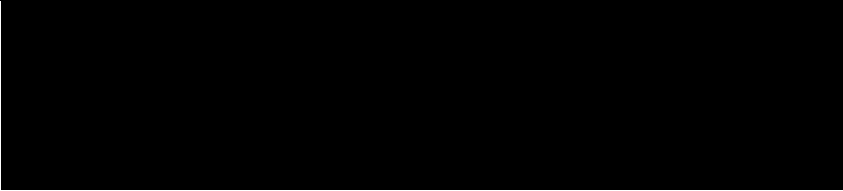
NEW WORLD STAGES

Bare is a vague, earnest musical about one teenager becoming increasingly confident in coming out while the other becomes increasingly scared. It's set in a Catholic school, though you'd barely notice. And since it begins with what is clearly a memorial (our hero steps forward and says he's been asked to say a few words...), you know that suicide is almost certainly waiting for us at the finale.

Our hero is Peter, a gay teen who is swept off his feet by the hunky Jason (handsome and strong-voiced Hason Hite) but soon discovers his desire to knock down the closet door is not shared. Peter is played by Taylor Trench, one of the weaker voices in a vocally unimpressive cast. Happily, he has charm to spare and his affable way with the one-liners and queer sensibility is the show's saving grace. He's not a joke machine: Peter is angry, upset, confused, determined, nervous, shy and sexy all at once. But he deals with that through biting asides and comments that are the lone bright spot in a very predictable tale.

Other characters include Jason, who isn't quite ready yet (of course), Jason's sister Nadia, played by Barrett Wilbert Weed -- appropriate last name since she shares or sells drugs with everyone when not denouncing their herd mentality or pining for Matt (Gerard Canonico) who loves Ivy (Elizabeth Judd) who is bored with Matt's "nice guy" routine and thinks she wants Jason who tries to pretend he wants Ivy but really wants to make out with Peter. You know, the usual high school love triangle or hexagon or whatever this is.





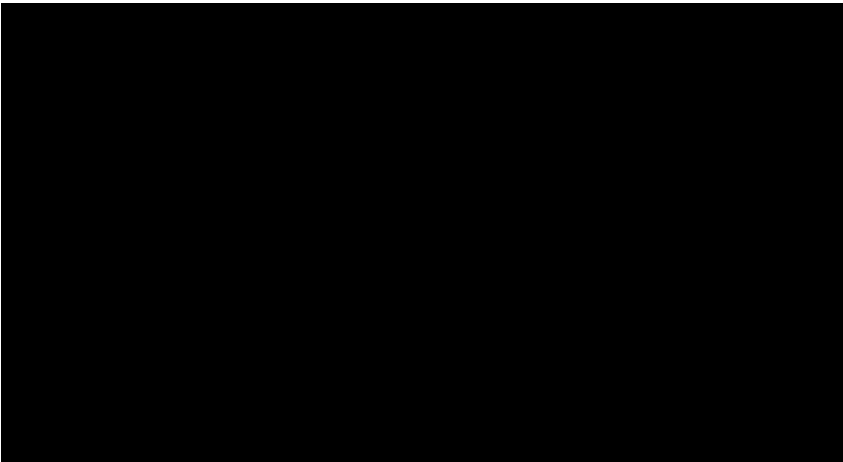
This revival has apparently been substantially reworked, though it's new to me. The Catholic setting barely registers and frankly I would have forgotten it completely if Father Mike (a weak Jerold E. Solomon in an admittedly weak role) wasn't always brooding somewhere on stage while the kids lusted after one another. A few songs make brief nods toward religion but essentially it feels like it could take place in any school. The Catholic guilt factor is minimal (and as a Catholic, I can spot it immediately). A subplot about tension between Father Mike and Sister Joan (a fun Missi Pyle) is just silly -- she's pushing the boundaries by having the kids perform *Romeo & Juliet* in the theater department? *Rent*, okay, but Shakespeare? They try -- Pyle has a dual role as a disco Virgin Mary offering advice to Peter in the closest to a showstopper that Bare has and the set has a vaguely stained glass look with hints of crosses here and there. But any sense of being rooted in Catholic culture has been watered down.

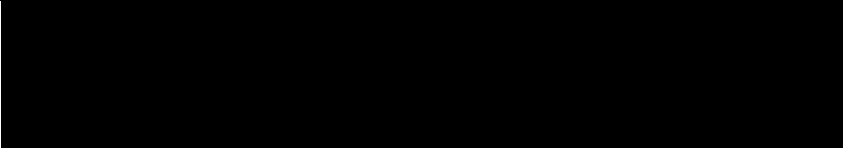
Stories of coming out and not coming out and the price that costs will never be passe, anymore than any coming of age tale or awakening of sexuality. It's a perennial. But it needs a specificity greater than an episode of *Gossip Girl* or *Glee* to make it come alive. That set by Donyale Werle looks striking at first glance: the stained glass look is created by filling it with color headshots and candid photographs. But that initial appeal ultimately tires with this one idea covering every inch of space. A movable platform sits in one corner and gets wheeled around a lot, pushed here and there. But it too is just a vague, unnecessary addition that feels cumbersome and hardly worth the bother.

Director Stafford Arima moves things along briskly and choreographer Travis Wall (who has done great work on TV's *So You Think You Can Dance* and elsewhere) creates a little energy, especially in an act two opener where Jason is engulfed in self-doubt. But the essential blandness of the book and lyrics by Jon Hartmere and music by Damon Inrabartolo make it impossible for the rest of the artists involved to bare their souls.

A CIVIL WAR CHRISTMAS ** 1/2 out of ****
NEW YORK THEATRE WORKSHOP

I like everything about Paula Vogel's *A Civil War Christmas*: it is set on Christmas Eve, 1864, the final one before the end of the war. It involves traditional carols and other songs from the era. And it takes a wide angle look at the turmoil of that most vicious and personal war where brother fought brother and the nation's soul was at stake. It is performed intelligently and well by a fine cast and anyone looking for an atypical holiday offering would surely do well to sample this rather than yet another spin on *A Christmas Carol*.





Yet I left unsatisfied. There's a schematic quality to this show, which has been produced widely (and well reviewed) in other cities. Of course, there's Lincoln (Bo Stillman) and his unsettled wife Mary (Alice Ripley), with Lincoln fussing over a gift he left for Mary at another place outside DC and Mary shopping ruthlessly to hide her nervous nature but also visiting wounded soldiers in a quiet mission of mercy. But we also get a panoply of characters that fit the needs of the show too neatly: a freed black man fighting for a country that barely offers basic rights in return, an escaped slave and her daughter struggling towards freedom, rebels running out of food, Yankee soldiers longing for home, John Wilkes Booth lying in wait for Abe, a woman who has left the bonds of slavery and become a force in DC society both as a seamstress for Mary and other women of leisure and as a figure in the black community that operates side by side with the white one to see to its own.

Director Tina Landau presents the work with clarity and directness, aided by a simple presentation and a cast that is uniformly strong.

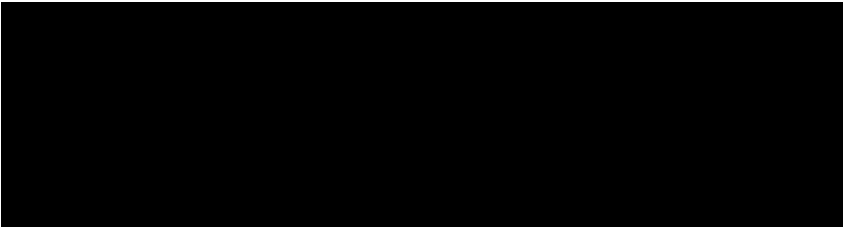
But it's all too...*neat* somehow. If Mary is visiting the wounded in DC, you just know you're going to at least catch a glimpse of Walt Whitman, if not hear him sing. It's also very civil. The show has moments of darkness of course. And a holiday show can be forgiven a certain sentimentality. But the little girl lost on the streets of DC in danger of freezing to death? Well, I've never cared for the tale of the little match girl and this is hardly less heart-tugging if more hopeful. Sure, Booth curses Lincoln and Yankee soldiers fight with their conscience about executing a young boy trying to steal food for the rebs.

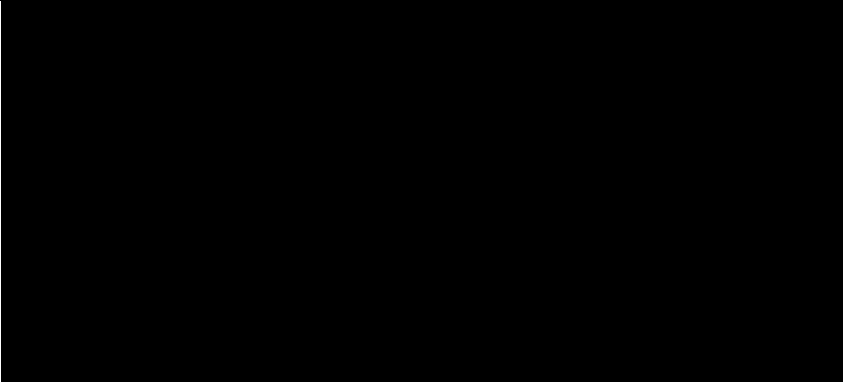
Vogel's play is so concerned about finding the common humanity in everyone that the ugly, intractable hatred of slavery that caused the war and the cruel violence that this war (and any war) engenders softens and blurs until it's hard to see much difference in anyone on stage, North or South. They all just want to get home for Christmas. Surely that is true at some level but it's also quite beside the point. The larger truth is that one side wanted to destroy families and enslave a people and ensure that they never celebrated Christmas except at the whim of a master who would make sure it was never a truly happy one. The play is clearly on the side of the light, but it's the dark that would have made this a stronger, better work.

THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD ** 1/2 out of ****
ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY AT STUDIO 54

Oh how actors love to improvise. Go to a production of *Hair* or *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* or any show where actors get to joke with the audience and let loose (scripts? who needs scripts when you have talent?) and you will see very happy actors indeed. That's certainly the case at this revival of the Tony-winning musical directed with skill by Scott Ellis. The actors are having a ball when they can sit in your lap and plead for votes to make their character the killer or find true love.

Yes, it's an interactive show, with Rupert Holmes turning an unfinished novel by Charles Dickens into a music hall lark where the cast performs the musical and then stops right where Dickens did (the drollest moment in the show) and then stops to take an audience poll about what should happen next. The result on display is about as good as this *Drood* can be.





Unfortunately, that's only so good because Holmes got away with murder. He had an arresting premise (okay, I promise to stop), a good conceit (a music hall company performance, which allows for jokes and the breaking of the fourth wall and a generally loose atmosphere) and everything else needed for a musical but songs. It's nigh on impossible to tell the songs apart -- if they were placed in a police lineup no witness could pick one out.

But what a handsome production this thin material receives. The set by Anna Louizos is marvelous, making excellent use of Studio 54, which in this case works great because it really feels like a music hall more than a Broadway house. She creates a lovely frame for the stage that has a warm feel and the painted backdrops are lovingly detailed but appropriate for the time. A modest but very effective train arrival at the beginning of Act Two feels like the grandest special effect in this context and works beautifully. The lighting by Brian Nason and the invisible sound design by Tony Meola work hand in hand throughout. The costumes by William Ivey Long are also spot-on: they're just the right note of colorful, like costumes of the period (as opposed to trying to look like clothes from the period), lending the perfect touch of artificiality to the evening without ever going for cheap jokes.

The cast is strong as well. Stephanie J. Block has fun as Drood and Alice Nutting (the actor she is playing who is playing Drood) while Betsy Wolfe never lets a chance to mug as Rosa Bud slip by (she's quite right since this is not a show for subtlety). Chita Rivera is properly given the final bow, bringing a great deal more to the Princess Puffer than Princess Puffer deserves, frankly. "Don't Quit While You're Ahead" is no one's idea of a strong 11 o'clock number but Rivera also makes you think it might be. Peter Benson makes the most of Bazzard and with his amusing solo "Never The Luck" Rupert Holmes actually gives him something of substance to sing and you briefly glimpse the better show that might have been. Gregg Edelman has fun in the modest role of the Rev. Mr. Crisparkle but it's Will Chase who has escaped from *Smash* to chew it up as the dastardly John Jasper that has perhaps the most fun of anyone. It's all held together with aplomb by the peerless Jim Norton in dual roles as the narrator Chairman and a doddering William Cartwright.

Ellis keeps things moving sharply. If there was even the slightest pause for laughs, it wouldn't have worked since the laughs are modest and this sort of nonsense works best at breakneck speed. *One Man, Two Guvnors* did this music hall turn more adroitly but that comparison gives you an idea of the silliness on display. I've always wanted to see the show but having done so have no desire to see it again: any lesser production would have made for a far more painful evening than this slight if pleasant one.

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

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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.

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