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Theater: Ben Whishaw's 'Crucible' Boils Over, Steve Martin's 'Bright Star' Dims, Sweet 'She Loves Me'

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THE CRUCIBLE *** out of ****

BRIGHT STAR ** out of ****

SHE LOVES ME *** out of ****

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WALTER KERR THEATRE

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* is a masterpiece, obviously. It can withstand an unnecessary change in setting, director Ivo Van Hove's now familiar tics (spare set, anonymous costuming and near-constant scoring) and even an utterly bonkers decision to go full-on *Exorcist* and still remain a solid and compelling evening of theater. If that's not playwrighting magic, I don't know what is.

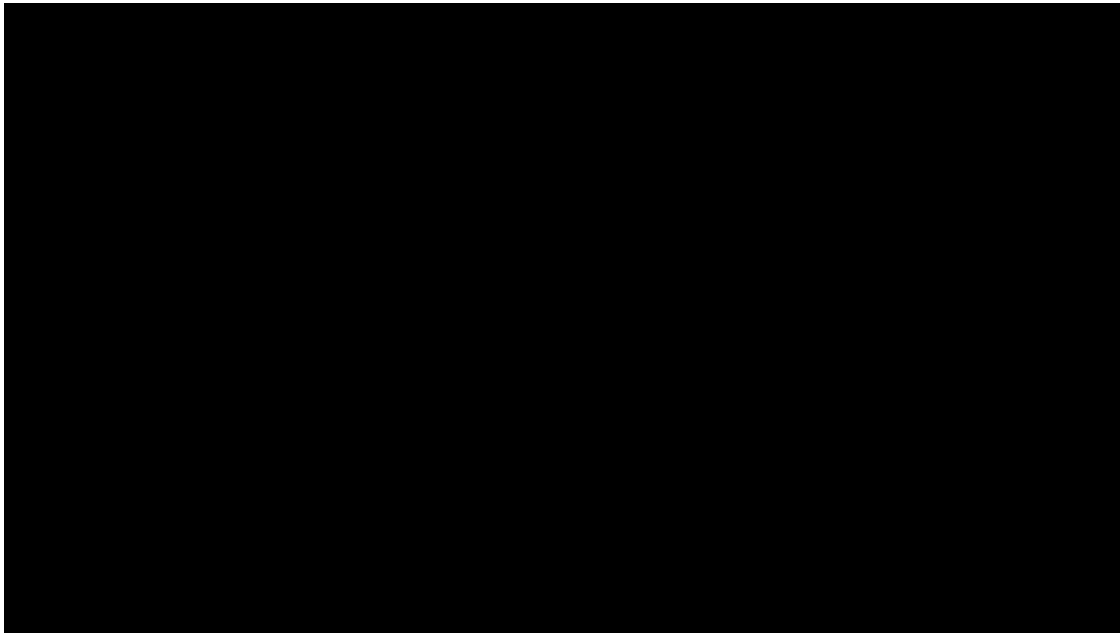
Don't worry. If you're lucky enough to be in New York City and attend this production, you'll see a mostly excellent cast do justice by Miller's famed tale of the Salem Witch Trials as a pointed stand-in for the demonization of McCarthyism. The terrific Ben Whishaw is compelling and forthright without ever being self-righteous as John Proctor.

Proctor had an affair with the very determined and very young Abigail (Saoirse Ronan, as good onstage as she is on film). Abigail is furious that John won't continue to dally with her and even angrier that his wife Elizabeth (Sophie Okonedo) has turned her out and bad-mouthed the girl to one and all.

Abigail's simmering resentment boils over when she and other girls are discovered by the priggish Rev. Parris (a strong Jason Butler Harner). He knows he saw the girls dancing (!), he thinks he saw one of the girls run naked through the trees (!!) and once he's asked, why yes maybe there was some devilish potion (!!!) in that brew they were crafting with the help of the Caribbean servant Tituba (Jenny Jules).

The girls are clearly hiding dark deeds (even if today, we would see them as pointless if not harmless) but their protestations are to no avail. The townsfolk are worried and since his own daughter is among the wicked, he can't afford to show leniency. (Worse, Rev. Parris is so tiresomely gloom and doom that his sermonizing hasn't yet won over folk and his employment by the town is in jeopardy; being pro-Satan would obviously be bad for business.) And so he makes the fateful choice to call in Rev. Hale (Bill Camp), a man who has wondrous success in other colonies throughout America. No one would accuse him of hypocrisy but when

Rev. Hale comes looking for the works of the devil, well by God he finds them.



Miller's play is one for the ages. How easily we see petty everyday grievances find their outlet in wild accusations. A woman who has lost baby after baby points a finger at Rebecca Nurse (a wonderful Brenda Wehle), who both midwifed those failed births AND had the temerity to produce a baker's dozen of children on her own. A man who greedily gobbles up the land of his neighbors points the finger at someone who owns a tract only he could afford. And inevitably Abigail points the finger at John Proctor's wife.

Director Ivo Van Hove certainly should be credited for drawing such talent to his side for every project. Almost every part is faultlessly played, from Ciarán Hinds as the unshakeable Deputy Governor Danforth to Camp as the dangerously open to doubt Rev Hale right down to the minor role of Giles Corey. That character - who loves to sue one and all and thus has a good working grasp of the law - is played by the great Jim Norton. It's not a significant part but Norton is so memorable you'll be forgiven for thinking the play is about him.

Whishaw and Okonedo make the couple at the story's heart palpably real. Elizabeth can often be seen as hatefully unforgiving but Okonedo finds the decency in her and allows us to see John as more self-flagellating than coldly done in. Whishaw similarly avoids the heroic mode for John; his inability to see himself in the same vein as the almost saintly Rebecca Nurse is all too human and heartbreaking.

The lone exception to the casting is Tavi Gevinson as Mary Warren, the new servant of the Proctors now that Abigail is gone. Young actresses always yearn for the role of Abigail, but Mary is the far more complex and demanding part. She must go from willful accomplice to somewhat reluctant truth-teller and then out of fear get pulled right back into the unspoken conspiracy of the accusing young women. Gevinson debuted on Broadway in a revival of *This Is Our Youth*, playing a role pretty close to home. Here she is quite out of her depth, unfortunately. It's a pity Ronan didn't realize this meatier part was better.

But *The Crucible* must overcome much more than one weak performance in an otherwise marvelous ensemble. Typically, he has a score by Philip Glass that is compelling and beautiful but overdone. It is present in the first act and omnipresent in the second, often overwhelming the performers. (It doesn't help that Rev. Hale is asked to speak so quietly at a key final moment that I had to lean forward and could barely hear him at all...and I was in the fifth row. God help the people in the second balcony.) Glass's contribution is ominous and gorgeous; I just wish it had been deployed more judiciously.

Worse is the inexplicable decision to set the story in a different time period. I suppose it doesn't really matter; the tale is timeless after all. But the driving force of the entire conceit is the Salem Witch Trials as a stand-in for McCarthyism. Instead of colonial times, the play is set in a vaguely modern schoolroom. (Given the loudspeakers we see, perhaps it's meant to be the 1950s?) Maybe, maybe one could make a case for setting it in a Congressional hearing à la the HUAC show trials. Yet a schoolroom adds little oomph other than reminding us of the youth of the young women at the heart of the story.

Playing off a line in the play, there's even a random if compelling stunt that lets nature loose upon the stage.

But the really inexplicable choice comes towards the end. If you're seeing the show, stop reading now, though since it's a classic any of the trappings conceived by a particular production can hardly be seen as spoilers. What Van Hove has done is to make manifest the witchcraft at issue. In one brief passage the current lowers and then rises briefly while we spy a young woman flying through the air. OK, that might just be a vision or a glimpse into what people fear or wonder or worry about. No one else sees her and it's just a brief isolated moment that may or may not have actually happened.

But they make nonsense of the play towards the end when the apocalyptic fears come true. As people argue and debate whether Satan is at play, the set literally crumbles around them, beams crashing to the ground and the winds of hell come whipping through an open window, wrecking havoc. It's the end of the world. And everyone is there. Everyone sees it. I mean, end of debate: Satan is in the house! But no one says a word! (How could they? It's not in the script.) What possible reason could there be for making the sorcery actually real, other than the fact that no one has probably ever done that before?)

This can only take away from the power of the story, not to mention undermining the very message Miller was offering: how hysteria and fear and jealousy can wreck lives even when the accused are blameless. One could tell a story that added in the complexity of recognizing that for the standards of the day, it's arguable some evil witchcraft circa Barbados was indeed taking place and thus the question of guilt and innocence is muddier than it might seem to us today since we live in a world where Satanic rituals and magic are laughed at.

But that's not the play Miller wrote. And these directorial flourishes ultimately amount to little more than that. The essential drama remains, along with a compelling cast. That's why this remains a satisfying evening of theater despite the shenanigans on display.

Van Hove might have keyed off the sense of nature running amok that led him to have a wolf wander on stage when no one is around. (It's actually a rare breed of dog.) The set could have slowly disintegrated without the actors being aware. The winds could have whipped through when people weren't present. Maybe that would have raised unsettling questions for the audience without interfering with the actual drama. Instead *The Crucible* boils over into some Exorcist-like extravaganza, distracting us from John Proctor's redemption, from the new-found love between him and Elizabeth, from the admirable bravery of the others being hanged and

from the very point of *The Crucible* in the first place. Why would Van Hove try all this? I guess the devil made him do it.

BRIGHT STAR ** out of ** CORT THEATRE**

It's almost a relief to realize Steve Martin won't immediately succeed at everything he attempts. But this hugely successful stand-up comic, acclaimed actor and director, polished writer, Grammy-winning bluegrass musician and even playwright hasn't hit it out of the park with that devilishly hard art-form the musical.

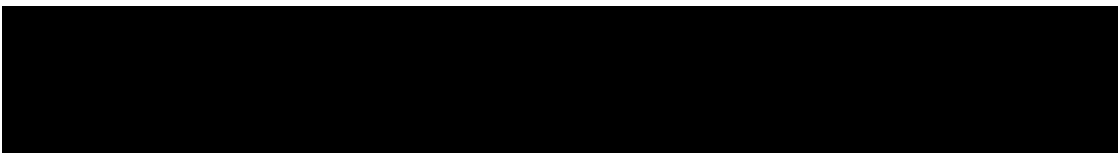
Still, the main problems with the modest and sweet *Bright Star* aren't Martin's, who handles the music, book and story. They're the lyrics of Edie Brickell (who also contributed with the music and story), the direction of Walter Bobbie, the choreography of Josh Rhodes and a lumbering scenic design by Eugene Lee. That's the problem with musicals: it's a group effort and the group let Martin down.

The story is momentarily confusing but soon resolves itself. The tale begins right after World War II with a soldier proudly returning home to North Carolina. Billy (a very appealing A.J. Shively) reunites with his dad (Stephen Bogardus) only to discover that there was no way to share the bad news: his momma is dead. If anything that makes Billy more determined than ever to pursue his dream of a career writing. [Don't do it, Billy! You'll never pay the bills! But I digress.]

His good friend Margo (Hannah Elless) works at the local bookstore and gosh she just loves and admires Billy's writing. Of course, we also know she loves and admires Billy but it's going to take him all of act one and most of act two before he realizes that. Margo is Billy's biggest fan and his toughest critic, offering up line by line edits and by gosh he's going to roll the dice and head to the big lights of Asheville, where a famed magazine that's apparently the New Yorker of the south is ruthlessly overseen by the hard to please but career-making tastemaker Alice Murphy (Carmen Cusack in a winning Broadway debut).

Billy talks his way past the gatekeepers and charms Alice with his whopper of a lie. She sees something in the kid, likes his writing enough to encourage him to write more and we're off to the races. The show also flashes back some 20 years earlier where we see the buttoned up and all business Alice as a wild child of sorts. She's a poor gal and determined to make something of herself. Alice wants to get away from her small town as bad as Billy did. But boy is Jimmy Ray (Paul Alexander Nolan) the son of the mayor a handsome sort. In by far the show's best number, Nolan and Cusack duet on a sexy, well-choreographed piece called "Whoa, Mama" that shows them flirting and pushing the envelope for what is proper back then (and even now) at a picnic.

Quicker than you can say whack-a-doodle, Alice is at the doctor's finding out she's pregnant. Jimmy Ray's father isn't about to let some upstart girl ruin his plans for the boy so he bundles her off to an isolated cabin, forces her daddy to give him custody of the child and then - in the show's most outlandish moment - instead of giving it up for adoption simply tosses the infant off the back of a moving train. So Alice is estranged from Jimmy Ray and her father, Jimmy Ray loses the woman he loves and won't speak to his dad and 20 years later we have to wonder how these two disparate stories are going to link up. No points for figuring it out.





The problems of *Bright Star* are many but the cast ain't one of 'em. British actress Cusack really does wow in her Broadway debut. (I for one am sorry to have missed her in a UK show called *Saucy Jack and the Space Vixens*.) She pulls off the tricky gambit of playing a character both in her teens and two decades later with aplomb, sings beautifully and holds the show together with her charisma. Nolan is every bit her equal in the smaller part of Jimmy Ray. Shively is the other main actor and his essentially decent, drama-free character is harder to keep interesting than one might think. He has to be awfully dim about the girl of his dreams and doesn't have to do much more than avoid the machinations of a big city gal and work hard at his writing. But Shively keeps him real.

Everyone is good, really, from Dee Hoty as Alice's mom to Michael Mulheren as Jimmy Ray's foolishly ruthless dad. Even small parts like that big city gal and her gay pal (both working for Alice) are put over strongly by Emily Padgett and Jeff Blumenkrantz.

Still, this is a musical and the songs are mostly not up to snuff. I was worried the first time I heard the album of songs from the show recorded by Martin and Brickell. The melodies were sprightly enough but the songs were awfully repetitive lyrically and didn't seem to be the sort that would deepen character or push the story forward. Things are a little better onstage since the songs are broken up by having a lot more voices jumping in rather than just Brickell's. (An artist I've liked, by the way.) But that can't compensate for thuddingly bad lyrics in "A Man's Gotta Do" and so many others that really don't deepen character or push the story forward.

Worse of all is the presentation. The costumes by Jane Greenwood are fine. But the set is a boondoggle. The main conceit is a sort of open-air log cabin on wheels that takes up a quarter of the stage. Some of the live band is in that cabin and it dominates the visual look of the show. Shove it over here and it's the front door of a cabin. Shove it over there and it's supposed to be part of the bookstore. Shove it back over here and it's something else. Actually, it never looks like anything except what it is: a big, lumbering, unappealing distraction that actors are forever having to manhandle. One worries the musicians will get seasick, being spun this way and that throughout the night. Actors leap through it and around it but there it is, precisely itself and nothing more. Tellingly, the few brief scenes where that cabin on wheels was not seen felt like a visual

relief.

It makes a hash of most everything. The choreography has dancers up and over and around it, but you can't really grasp where anyone is supposed to be or why they're maneuvering around it. One takes for granted the fluid direction that can tell a story with a minimum of props. But not when you see a scene where Billy leaves home and heads to Asheville. Actors lift chairs and place them down, wave around blankets and Shively traipses this way and that to no good effect. You recognize intellectually what they're trying to do but Bobbie fails to make it happen. And that damn cabin looms in the background throughout.

And the apparent infanticide throws the story way out of whack, given its sensibility. Oh, I know, folk songs and bluegrass music delve into dark corners. But the warm demeanor on tap makes that unnecessary plot twist feel off-putting. They could put a barrier between Alice and Jimmy Ray with far less drastic measures. Heck, even small details get overlooked. That gay employee of Alice seems to be about to dally with a customer at a bar they head to but this unspoken storyline is dropped as soon as it's raised. And the big dance number for Billy and Lucy peters out as he slips away, ending it on a deflating note.

It goes down harmlessly, thanks to talent like Nolan (charming in *Daddy Long Legs*), Shively and especially Cusack. With weak songs, *Bright Star* was never going to shine that brightly. But this very messy production does it no favors. A simpler, more straightforward staging would do wonders for this gentle tale. Tweak the storyline and write a few new songs and Martin's old-fashioned piece could have a whole new life.

SHE LOVES ME *** out of ****

ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY AT STUDIO 54

This revival of *She Loves Me* is a bright, sparkling bon-bon of a show without a care in the world. That cheery disposition envelops everything from the pretty enough to eat set to the performances of the entire cast right down to star Laura Benanti's choice to sing in a whipped cream voice with classical stylings a la operetta.

The only problem with that is the fact that a truly great production of *She Loves Me* would include the dark veins that make this musical and the previous film and play *The Shop Around The Corner* classics.

Keep in mind that this confection charmingly mounted by The Roundabout includes attempted suicide, the shattering of a a decades long marriage, a lothario who callously uses women and deceives his innocent boss, heartbreak and even a central romance where the man has an unfair advantage of knowledge over the woman that he pushes to the point where you almost (almost!) turn against him. You wouldn't know it watching this show.

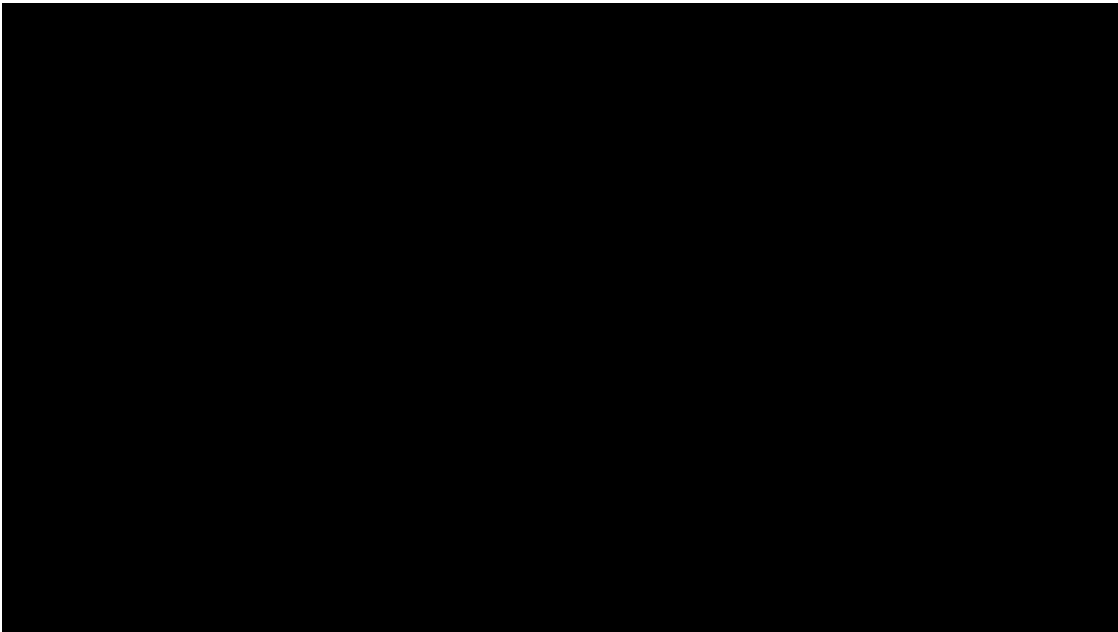
What you do have is pleasurable fun delivered with aplomb by an excellent cast with all the care that the Roundabout can lavish upon it. The story takes place in Budapest between the wars, 1934 to be exact, so you know its dark approach is years away. The setting is Maraczek's Parfumerie, a nicely run but not hugely important store that specializes in lady's soaps and perfumes and jewel boxes and other knick knacks. It's not Macy's but it's not rundown either and the employees are a family of sorts, the usual eccentric characters tossed together by employment.

Ilona (a delightful Jane Krakowski) is a looker who is having a secret romance with Steven (Gavin Creel), an oily sort who is happy to keep their affair hush-hush from the others. Since she's a looker and so sweet, one

knows immediately he's not to be trusted. Ladislav (the always dependable and winning Michael McGrath) simply keeps his head down and does his job. In contrast, Georg (Zachary Levi of TV's *Chuck* and his great voice work on the animated gem *Tangled*) is the rising star, a favorite of the owner and clearly with upper management in his sites. That owner is the affable Mr. Maraczek (played with ease by Byron Jennings). They all dote on the messenger boy Arpad (the scene-stealing Nicholas Barasch), who yearns to become a clerk some day.

Their calm and familiar world is upended when Amalia (Laura Benanti) wrangles a job with an off-the-cuff sales pitch to a customer that wins Mr. Maraczek a bet and places her at odds with Georg. The two of them are constantly at each other's throats, with Amalia always just a little late to work and Georg always just a little too eager to criticize her. They're made for each other obviously but what do they care? Each of them has a secret pen pal, a person they've never met but with whom they've been exchanging letter via a lovelorn ad. THAT'S the person they're met for, not this annoying fellow or gal right in front of them. Of course, a long-awaited date to meet in person reveals to Georg in fact their secret pen pal is their rival at work. Complications ensue before we can find out whether they can find romance in real life or only on the page. One such problem: Georg is inexplicably forced to quit by a furious Mr. Maraczek for no good reason. Good heavens, how will it all turn out?

I've never seen the original play by Miklós L. szló, but the 1940 film starring Jimmy Stewart and Margaret Sullavan is one of the all-time greats. What you remember is the delightful romantic comedy. But every time you see watch it, you're struck anew by the mournful streak that runs through it. Mr. Maraczek thinks Georg is the one cheating with his beloved wife, which is why Maraczek both pushes Georg to quit and attempts to shoot himself. When Amalia thinks she's been stood up by her secret pen pal, she's genuinely heartbroken and knowing that Georg can tease and toy with her makes us a little uncomfortable. The danger to the single Ilona of being toyed with by a man in that era is always an unspoken concern. It's a little like *It's A Wonderful Life*. *She Loves Me* shouldn't be *that* dark, but all you remember about Stewart's holiday classic is the wave of joy at the end. What makes that so effective is the depths of despair it plummets before then.



Similarly, a really great *She Loves Me* would have more weight and reality. This production seems to take place in a fairy land of all reward and no risk, happy ending guaranteed. The set design of David Rockwell is delightful. The streets of Budapest look adorable and the exterior of the Parfumerie opens up like a present being unwrapped. The store itself is a wonderland of bright colors and beautiful wares. The employees are dressed to the nines, with not just Ilona but everyone looking positively smashing.

Director Scott Ellis fails to ground the show in reality the way it should be to really pierce our hearts. This isn't Astaire and Rogers in a high gloss fantasy. The yearning and heartbreak on display is much more powerful if these are regular folk, not glamor gals. The store is just a store, not Willy Wonka's factory. Mr. Maraczek is as desperate as a man can be, trying to shoot himself to death at the end of act one. But at the beginning of act two, he seems positively jolly in his hospital room just hours later. Jennings is rightly taking his cue from the entire production yet the show suffers for it. Later, when he is alone in the world and desperate for company, Mr. Maraczek settles for dining with the messenger boy turned clerk Arpad. Except here it plays more like a bachelor party in the making rather than a sad old man picking up the pieces of his life.

Benanti sings in that semi-classical style I mentioned, which she puts over with ease. It's the vocal equivalent of the costumes and sets, divorcing us from the reality of what's going on. Nothing could ever really go along in a world where people can sing like that, certainly not genuine sadness and loneliness. She seems to be auditioning for the role of Eliza in *My Fair Lady*, a role which by God she can and should be doing on Broadway soon. But it heightens the fantasy and that lowers our emotional investment.

Levi in contrast has a modest voice and can't do more than offer a regular-guy spin on singing and dancing. Ironically, that makes him better casting for Georg though we'll never know if he could get past the glib surface and find the drama that resides underneath this take. To be fair, the others downplay the hijinks and keep their characters pretty realistic too. If Ellis had done the show justice, he certainly had a cast that could deliver.

This is my first time seeing *She Loves Me* and one terrible choice resides with the book by Joe Masteroff. (The impeccable music is by Jerry Bock and the lyrics by Sheldon Harnick of *Fiddler On The Roof* of course.) Masteroff sets that long-awaited meeting of pen pals in a fancy restaurant that is an assignation for lovers, often illicit in nature. The redoubtable Peter Bartlett does his best with the role of an officious waiter trying to maintain 'A Romantic Atmosphere.' But people on the make is a far cry from the romantic innocence of our two pen pals. This setting - played for drawn out, broad laughter - feels utterly at odds with the scene and the show.

Happily, the cast rises above. Krakowski is an utter pleasure as Ilona and Creel avoids the moustache-twirling that would have made Steven a panto villain. Mcgrath is so immediately likable you always wish he'd get to carry a show rather than do the heavy lifting for others. Levi has charm and chemistry to spare with Benanti, who is a pro and anyone's idea of a winning leading lady, despite her misguided vocal choice here. And in the small role of Arpad, Barasch follows the lead of the rest and avoids mugging. He's a charming presence and somehow manages to make the most of his show-stopper turn in "Try Me" - bouncing on the hospital bed and practically off the hospital walls too - without actually *looking* like he's trying to stop the show. He makes the most of his opportunity.

For all my caveats and misgivings, it was great to finally hear this score and see this show performed live for the first time. Song after song glides by, from the opener "Good Morning, Good Day" to the amusing penultimate "Twelve Days Of Christmas." Act Two almost floats by on one winner after another: the aforementioned "Try Me" followed by the comic "Where's My Shoe?" to the peak "Vanilla Ice Cream" and the title track and Krakowski's peak "A Trip To the Library." It's hard to make a bad show out of songs like that. It's just a pity this version of *She Loves Me* is merely sweet when it could be bittersweet, a far more complicated and memorable emotion.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***
Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2
Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2
Skeleton Crew ***
Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before
The Grand Paradise ***
Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2
Something Rotten ***
Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2
Broadway & The Bard * 1/2
Prodigal Son **
A Bronx Tale: The Musical **
Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **
Nice Fish ***
Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***
Hughie **
Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2
Straight ** 1/2
Eclipsed ***
Red Speedo ***
The Royale ** 1/2
Boy ****
The Robber Bridegroom ***
Hold On To Me, Darling ***
Blackbird ** 1/2
Disaster! *
The Effect ** 1/2
Dry Powder ** 1/2
Head Of Passes ** 1/2
Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2
The Crucible (w Ben Wishaw) ***
Bright Star **
She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***

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