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"LYSISTRATA JONES" * out of ****
[WALTER KERR THEATRE](#)

This thin idea for a sketch on *Saturday Night Live* -- much less a full-fledged musical -- has an appealing if generally vocally challenged cast let down by the book of award-winning playwright Douglas Carter Beane (*Sister Act*) and the music and lyrics of his collaborator (both professionally and personally) Lewis Flinn. This is surely one of the first if not the first time an openly gay couple has created a Broadway musical. Sadly, that happy bit of trivia is the most memorable thing about the show.

The story is a spin on the Greek play by Aristophanes in which women strive to end the Peloponnesian War by withholding sexual favors until their men stop fighting. In our show, new college student Lysistrata Jones (Patti Murin) starts dating basketball player Mick (Josh Segarra) but is, like, totally bummed he and the other guys on the team don't really try. They've lost every game this season (and pretty much every game as long as anyone can remember). Before you can say Buffy, the bubbly Lysistrata recruits the other girlfriends of the athletes to proclaim "No More Giving It Up" until the guys actually triumph. Instead of stopping fighting, these girls want their men to *start* fighting, or at least *caring* about whether they win. Ultimately, the message of the show is that negatively insisting "no sex until you win" isn't nearly as powerful as inspiring them with love, but it's a long road to get there.



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Along the way, we meet two non-cheerleaders and non-jocks: librarian Robin (Lindsay Nicole Chambers, doing her level best) who delivers "hilarious" spoken word poetry slams and announces her attraction to Lysistrata (though that idea is immediately dropped) and nerdy social activist Xander (the cute Jason Tam, presumably named in tribute to the character in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*). He seems like a gay character and you assume he'll fall for one of the guys on the team, but this too is a misdirection since Xander falls for Lysistrata.

It's all presided over by Hetaira, a Greek goddess of sorts who also doubles as the madam of a whore house the girls turn to for practical advise and the guys turn to for release when the pressure gets too much. Liz Mikel plays this dual role and despite several unflattering costumes and a character that makes you cringe with its "winking" cliched nature, Mikel through sheer stage presence and charm (and some real pipes) somehow manages to maintain her dignity.

The same could be said for the rest of the cast. Cindy Tolan is the casting director and while almost no one here other than Mikel has a strong voice, they are uniformly appealing as actors and comics. Star Patti Murin was an understudy on *Xanada* (which Tolan cast and Beane wrote the book for) and that's no surprise. Just like Kerry Butler, Murin is a delightful personality who holds the stage with ease and makes this foolishness almost seem worthwhile. She's no belter but her voice has a charm in the quiet moments. You can easily see Murin on TV, film and stage comedies. Segarra is weaker in the singing (though also not bad in his one quiet song "When She Smiles") and the book doesn't allow him to really create a convincing jock who is a closet lover of poetry. But Segarra has charisma and would have made a good Sweathog in the days of *Welcome Back, Kotter* -- he plays dumb, but lovable very nicely.

Tam has an even worse role, usually saddled with the joke costume of the team mascot. In his big number "Hold On," Tam is saddled with ridiculous hand gestures that make it look as if he's interpreting for the blind. He too is not much of a singer but you imagine he deserves better material as an actor. Alexander Aguilar is by far the best dancer, nicely demonstrated in the song "Lay Low," the closest director and choreographer Dan Knechtges comes to mixing street moves, basketball and traditional Broadway dancing into an interesting mix.

In fairness, poor tunes are hard to build interesting dances around and after two viewings it's still hard to remember any of the musical numbers. They're performed very quietly and without any sense of rocking out by the house band, which may be keeping the volume down so as not to drown out the modest voices of the cast. The book is essentially the same as the production that leaped from *The Gym at Judson* to Broadway, with I think a few modest additions like a joke about the iPhone service Siri and a Newt Gingrich reference.

About the only interesting element of the show's earlier incarnation was that it was performed in an actual gym. Switching to Broadway hasn't been a problem for set designer Allen Moyer but a row of lockers and some hoops don't exactly wow with their creativity. He and lighting designer Michael Gottlieb have added a bank of bright lights at the back of the stage (a la *Dreamgirls*) that is seen at the beginning, partially revealed at the end of Act One and fully revealed for the finale. It adds a little pizzazz but clashes horribly with the gym setting and the overall effect is pedestrian. The costumes by David C. Woolard and Thomas Charles LeGalley are fine for the students though again not as regal or sexy as Mikel deserves. On a side note, the ball control of the cast is vastly improved. Before, it seemed unlikely any of them had ever even watched a basketball game, much less played one. Across the board, they're much improved and the audience doesn't need to spend its time worrying about whether they can hold onto the ball.

It's a pity this show rushed to Broadway though, to be fair, they were misled by summertime reviews that seized on the play as a pleasant diversion and vastly oversold its appeal. A second mounting on a smaller scale would have given cooler heads a chance to prevail. But the economics of theater in New York City at the moment mean the risk to reward of Off Broadway just doesn't compute. That's not to say *Lysistrata Jones* would work better in a smaller house. It didn't work in the tiny space below Washington Square Park and it doesn't work here. It simply should have been mounted (and genuinely worked on, rather than merely coasting on what they had) so everyone involved could realize there wasn't much there before the stakes and cost rose so high. It's always good to try your best, but sometimes you have to recognize when the game is over and that putting in more effort won't change the final score.



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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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Theater: *Best Man* Squeaks Out Win; *Now. Here. This.* Scattered

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GORE VIDAL'S *THE BEST MAN* ** 1/2 out of ****
NOW. HERE. THIS. * 1/2 out of ****

GORE VIDAL'S *THE BEST MAN* ** 1/2 out of ****
GERALD SCHOENFELD THEATRE

The Best Man is set primarily in hotel rooms at a brokered convention in Philadelphia in 1960. As the scenes shift from the hotel room of one candidate to that of another -- along with hallways and press conferences - the sets by Derek McLane move with a stately, unhurried ease. Effective and professional, they go about their business in full view of the audience. We can see them working, watch the panels move into place, observe chairs and couches shift here and there, all of it clicking into place. Knowing how it all fits together may even be half the fun.

The same might be said for Gore Vidal's blackly humorous drama. It manages to sound quite contemporary and up-to-date (one candidate may be closeted, the other is a philanderer) while at heart being thoroughly old-fashioned, right down to its stodgy three act structure. Something more lacerating and timeless about political power and the needs of the country could be fashioned from this material, perhaps. But with this starchy cast and the smooth professionalism on display, what you get is more comforting than challenging.

John Larroquette stars as Bill Russell, the liberal candidate who served as the Secretary of State for former President Artie Hockstader (James Earl Jones). Bill cheats on his wife (Candice Bergen) but no one really cares about that. It's the mental breakdown he had a few years ago that is the real dirt and his



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conservative opponent (Eric McCormack) has snagged the files and is pressuring Russell to drop out so he can be the party's nominee. When Russell gets information that McCormack's Cantwell may be a homosexual (despite his curvy young wife Kerry Butler) the play's central dilemma is set: is Russell willing to play dirty to get the nomination or will he stick to his principles and see the country saddled with a hypocrite whose policies Russell abhors?

Director Michael Wilson (who unfortunately was not able to bring his marvelous *Orphan's Home Cycle* to Broadway) delivers a smooth evening of entertainment, though one that doesn't linger in the mind. Larroquette proved his Broadway bona fides in the very good musical revival *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying*. Like David Hyde Pierce, he looks set to turn his TV stardom into a substantial second life on Broadway and we're the luckier for it. Vidal's dialogue has snap to it and Larroquette makes the most of it, without ever resorting to the rat-a-tat rhythm of the sitcom. Similarly, McCormack is solid in his work as the less likable Cantwell. We're clearly rooting for Russell but one of the strengths of the play is that this isn't a case of good versus evil, as such. It's quite possible that Cantwell's ruthlessness makes him the better candidate and the better President, as Hockstader believes at one point. If Russell won't do everything in his power to defeat Cantwell, how's he going to face down the Ruskies?

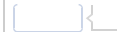
In secondary roles, Jones and Angela Lansbury (as a power broker at the convention who is focused on the female vote) bring ample star wattage. Lansbury has fun in her showcased part and Jones barks out his lines with practiced ease. He may have lost a line on the night I saw, but playing an ailing former President, Jones was able to work the hemming and hawing of a brief moment right into his performance. Butler has drawing fun as the silly but viperish wife of Cantwell, Michael McKean is smooth support as a campaign manager, Jefferson Mays is amusing and weasely in a small turn and Bergen allows herself to look as dowdy as possible to contrast her no-nonsense character with Butler. In general, the costumes for the women by Ann Roth are not terribly flattering, intentionally so in Bergen's case but also true for Lansbury who has an afternoon tea outfit gone wild on in the third act.

But with talent like that on board and a script that feels relevant, one hopes for more than just easy laughs and a pleasant evening of theater. It might win your vote (and your precious play-going dollars) opposite lesser competition. But is it a show you'll feel passionate about and go door to door urging friends and neighbors to support it? No. For the best candidate, you'll have to search elsewhere.

NOW. HERE. THIS. * 1/2 out of ****
VINEYARD THEATRE

In this new work by the team behind *[title of show]*, the four genial stars of that work are inspired by the words of monk and author Thomas Merton. They want to stay "present" and use his catch phrase "Now. Here. This." to do so. This somehow leads them to a daytrip at the Museum of Natural History where they wander the exhibits, make jokes ("I wonder if turtles would eat chocolate turtles?") and in a rather scattered way remember painful episodes from their childhood and adult life.

In short, they do everything but stay in the moment, nor do they particularly relive scenes from their lives where they would have benefitted from staying in the moment or learn what was lost by *not* staying in the moment. They simply fill up the evening with personal anecdotes of a therapeutic nature and lazy pop culture references like the Members Only jacket and Gloria Vanderbilt jeans. Instead of *Now. Here. This.*



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the show should be titled *Then. There. That.*

The gang is so friendly and earnest you feel a little bad badmouthing their work. But what can you do? The show takes forever to set up its premise about staying in the moment and then by and large ignores it. The setting of the Museum of Natural History is random, as is most of what we're told. Jeff Bowen tells us about being closeted as a kid and how he coped by being the class clown, dating a girl with an over-protective dad and so on. Does that have anything to do with the premise of the show? Not really.

Heidi Blickenstaff (all the actors play characters named after themselves and the implication is that the stories are lightly fictionalized, if at all) says she came from money but she'd trade all her wealth and advantage if only her dad would not be so reserved and tell her verbally that he loves her. "I love you," she announces proudly at one point, "breaking" the unspoken contract about not getting emotional and intimate in her family. I'm glad for her but in a snarky moment afterwards felt like she should have been paying the audience for the therapy session rather than the other way around.

Hunter Bell recites an embarrassing story of being caught masturbating by his father (luckily his father didn't know at the time that Hunter was usually thinking about Captain Kirk or the awkwardness might have tripled). It's funny but again, has precious little to do with what we're constantly told is the show's theme -- staying in the moment.

Susan Blackwell -- in another scene that feels like emotional shorthand for pain -- is shamed when the mother of a fellow student comes by her house and realizes that Susan's folks are hoarders to a shocking, embarrassing degree.

All these tales come at you randomly. For a while they seem to be chronological but just when you think we're moving towards the present the stories jump back to early school days. Without some sort of structure, the randomness of the memories -- however individually interesting -- become exhausting.

A few passages stick out -- notably a scene where they reminisce about saying goodbye to a dying grandparent, a scene that actually seems to reflect on the benefit of being present in the moment and knowing this is a special, sad event. Similarly, a song about being seasick actually includes an insight on how to overcome that by focusing on the ocean and what's happening around you.

Others are less pointed, if still effective. The riff on *Tootsie* -- which is indeed one of the best comedies of all time -- is wittily done. Though again, it's introduced by the fact that they often pretend to love "serious" work like *Citizen Kane* but in fact prefer lowbrow works. That has nothing to do with staying present; that has to do with self-confidence and an ability to recognize that not all great art comes from "serious" work. (Though *Citizen Kane* is damn entertaining.)

I didn't get a chance to see [title of show], unfortunately. The songs here by Bowen have a line by line cleverness, but none of the tunes have memorable melodies and they soon blur together. The direction and choreography by Michael Berresse is solid; he keeps things moving neatly and the changes in scenes and time are always quickly grasped. All the other tech elements are strong, especially the projection design by Richard DiBella. It all works to give the team an ideal framework in which to present their ideas.

Ultimately, of course, it's to no avail. The best way to make a theater audience be "present," to stay in the moment, is to create a strong piece of theater. Suddenly, no one is coughing or texting or thinking about what they're going to have for dinner. They are focused entirely on what is happening on stage. In *Now*.



Isaac



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Once *** 1/2

Once on Broadway ****

Olive and The Bitter Herbs ** 1/2

On A Clear Day You Can See Forever * 1/2

One Arm ***

Other Desert Cities on Broadway ** 1/2
Private Lives **
Queen Of The Mist ** 1/2
Radio City Christmas Spectacular ** 1/2
Regrets * 1/2
Relatively Speaking * 1/2
Richard III w Kevin Spacey at BAM ***
The Road To Mecca ** 1/2
Samuel & Alasdair: A Personal History Of The Robot War ** 1/2
The Select (The Sun Also Rises) ** 1/2
Seminar **
Septimus & Clarissa *** 1/2
Shlemiel The First ** 1/2
Silence! The Musical * 1/2
69 Degrees South * 1/2
Song From The Uproar **
Sons Of The Prophet *** 1/2
Sontag: Reborn *
Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark * 1/2
Standing On Ceremony: The Gay Marriage Plays **
Stick Fly **
The Submission **
Super Night Shot ** 1/2
Sweet and Sad **
The Table ** 1/2
Titus Andronicus at Public with Jay O. Sanders * 1/2
Tribes *** 1/2
The Ugly One **
Unnatural Acts ***
Venus In Fur ***
We Live Here **
Wild Animals You Should Know ** 1/2
Wit ** 1/2
Zarkana **

NEW YORK MUSICAL THEATRE FESTIVAL 2011

Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Wild Prairie Dame *** 1/2
Central Avenue Breakdown ** 1/2
Crazy, Just Like Me ***
Cyclops: A Rock Opera *
Ennio: The Living Paper Cartoon ** 1/2
F---ing Hipsters **
Ghostlight **
Gotta Getta Girl ** 1/2 for staged reading
Greenwood *
Jack Pery Is Alive (And Dating) * 1/2
Kiki Baby ** 1/2
Kissless * 1/2
Madame X **
The Pigeon Boys ***
Time Between Us * 1/2
Tut **

FRINGEFEST NYC 2011

Araby *
The Bardy Bunch **
Books On Tape ** 1/2
Civilian **
Hard Travelin' With Woody ***
Leonard Cohen Koans *** 1/2
The More Loving One **
The Mountain Song *** 1/2
Paper Cuts ***
Parker & Dizzy's Fabulous Journey To The End Of The Rainbow ** 1/2
Pearl's Gone Blue ***
Rachel Calof ** 1/2
Romeo & Juliet: Choose Your Own Ending **

2 Burn * 1/2

Walls and Bridges **

What The Sparrow Said ** 1/2

Yeast Nation ***

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.

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Robert Sullivan: Titanic: Why It Still Matters

Titanic had a thorough mix of humanity, traveling together toward whatever fate awaited. That fate, everyone figured, was a docking in New York. But an iceberg intervened and here is where the question "Why do we still care about Titanic?" gets more interesting.



Wilborn Hampton: The Best Man: Democracy in Action

When Gore Vidal's *The Best Man* opened in 1960, JFK and LBJ were slugging it out for the Democratic presidential nomination. Half a century later, Michael Wilson's riveting revival is a timely reminder that in politics, the more things change the more they stay the same.



Kirsten West Savali: *Think Like A Man: Is Our Economic Growth Worth the Price of Admission?*

I don't like Steve Harvey -- yes, I said it. To be more precise, since I've never met the man personally, I don't like what Steve Harvey represents.



Regina Weinreich: *The Best Man: Gore Vidal's Patriot Act*

Sadly as Americans sort out the values of the real candidates, *The Best Man* is a reminder that the worst man will have a chance to triumph, and the best may only be a shadow of our highest ideals.

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||| [Now. Here. This. 2012](#) | |||

'Now. Here. This.,' at the Vineyard Theater - [NYTimes.com](#)

NY Review: 'Now. Here. This.'

[The Best Man - Broadway Tickets](#) | [Broadway](#) | [Broadway.com](#)

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tptom
93 Fans

07:40 PM on 04/06/2012

I will be seeing The Best Man because I like original A to Z stories where the playwright sticks (his) neck out by actually writing one. I also like dramatic acting, intelligent ideas and of course those stars... As for "Now. Here. This" If it ever makes it to the reading room at Barnes and Noble, I will try to attend. I heard the cast is quite charming.

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3fingerbrown
608 Fans

09:37 AM on 04/03/2012

Saw The Best Man and enjoyed it.

Happily for Vidal and the producers, several of the issues discussed in the play are still timely for audiences today. Sadly for the rest of us, among the issues are things, like birth control, we assumed to be settled decades ago. Politically, the country is in many ways right back where Vidal started from 50 years ago.

The big revelation among the cast, for me, was Larroquette. I'd never seen him in a play before and was unaware of what a commanding and accomplished stage actor he is. After his success in two revivals back to back, I'd like to see him in a brand-new play he could call his own.

Generally, I'd recommend The Best Man for its witty dialogue, for Larroquette, for Jones (he's lost a little off the bottom of that mighty bass voice since the last time I'd seen him, but the old lion can still roar in the big moments), and McKean, who works wonders with what could be a thankless role (much of his best work is done by simply listening to his co-stars -- young actors take note!)

And I'd especially recommend it to those who enjoy seeing actors they know from TV and movies live on stage. It's rare that they'll get to see so many famous stars on the hoof in one place. That it still feels like a play and not a SAG cocktail party is to the director's credit.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER
Michael Giltz
freelance writer
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02:07 AM on 04/04/2012

As value for "most stars in one show," this production absolutely can't be beat. Larroquette was terrific in the How To Succeed musical as well. I too look forward to seeing him in a new work some day soon. Thanks for commenting.

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