



Theater: Bitter "Sweet" Charity; Brilliant Kitson



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SWEET CHARITY ** out of ****

MOUSE: THE PERSISTENCE OF AN UNLIKELY THOUGHT *** 1/2 out of ****

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THE NEW GROUP AT SIGNATURE THEATRE

Sweet Charity was conceived, choreographed and directed by Bob Fosse and perhaps in its first most successful incarnation it had some of Fosse's edge and tartness. But at heart, this is a softer, middlebrow spin on Federico Fellini's gem *Nights Of Cabiria*, a movie starring Giulietta Masina as a cheerful, optimistic prostitute who has a brief chance of escaping "the life" only to have her hopes cruelly dashed. At the end of the film in one of cinema's great sequences, she strides down the street saying hello to one and all as always but she is a little broken inside and you break a little too.

In contrast, *Sweet Charity* has a jokey first act which has the fingerprints of book writer Neil Simon all over it. The second act gets momentarily more real only to wimp out at the end, soften the blow she suffers at the climax and leave our heroine as plucky as ever. This is a show so middle-class and demure that no one ever says the words "hooker" or "whore" or god forbid "prostitute." Even the word "sex" is only whispered in a jab at prudishness since it's whispered at a YMCA where a woman wants to attend a lecture but is too ashamed to say the title out loud. Despite Fosse's later work, hard-edged and heart-breaking are not on this show's mind.

On the other hand, it does boast a handful of catchy numbers with music by Cy Coleman and words by the great lyricist Dorothy Fields — few musicals can even say that. No wonder people keep mounting it, despite decreasing success. This new revival by Leigh Silverman wants to keep those terrific numbers, harken back to Fellini's film and restore some gritty passion. Sadly, it doesn't really work because the DNA of Simon's book and even many of the songs work against those instincts at every stage. (It would be years before Simon would layer in passion and pain alongside his admirable comic chops.)

One thing they get undeniably right is Sutton Foster as Charity. She has the same indestructible core wrapped in sweetness that Masina and Gwen Verdon and Shirley MacLaine brought to the part in its first appearances on film and stage and then film again. Foster can sing. Foster can dance. Foster can tackle the comic bits. Foster can do it all. So it's telling that in this tiny space where a talent like hers should blow the roof off that even with her at its center, this *Charity* feels less than thrilling.

It begins with Charity dumped into a lake by her latest loser boyfriend, a guy who grabs her purse and is never seen again. Why does she put up with it? Charity herself can't say but she hasn't lost hope (yet). She heads to work as a taxi dancer, a gal who lets guys paw at her for minutes at a time...and occasionally lets them do more later, though that is only discreetly hinted at. And here comes one of the show's great numbers, "Big Spender," a tune in which the dancers come on to their customers. The choreography by Joshua Bergasse makes modest nods to Fosse but by and large remains workmanlike if uninspired in these tight confines. The talented chorus (solid to a fault) put it over, but this is mild stuff.

Charity somehow finds herself in a nightclub with a famous Italian movie star and then back at his apartment...not to have sex but to (eventually) hide in his closet when the star's girlfriend pops in and they make love. Here again Simon's touch is evident: the nightclub scene is a mild parody of glamorous escapades, the movie star is played for laughs and the most memorable bit is when Foster must dive into a closet but first takes the time to make a sandwich for herself with elaborate care while the star and his servant look on in amazement. It's a funny bit, thanks to Foster but feels utterly out of place with where this revival wants to go.

The show finally gets serious when Charity is trapped in an elevator with a nebbishy regular guy named Oscar (Shuler Hensley) and she calms him down (sort of), leading into “I’m The Bravest Individual.” It’s still played for laughs but here at least the laughs are built around real people. In Act Two we watch as Charity and Oscar go out on genuine, nice, no hands-everywhere dates and it’s hard to say which one of them is more astonished by their dumb luck in finding the other.

In an understandable but bad decision, the show moves Charity’s most introspective and important song “Where Am I Going?” to the finale. It should come right here, when Charity needs to find the courage to finally confess she doesn’t work in a bank but is in fact a taxi dancer. (You know, a hooker.) Turns out Oscar already knows and wants to be with her anyway! Mind you, right before the wedding he gets cold feet and runs off, saying he just can’t forget about the many men she’s been with before. Poor sweet Charity is left alone yet again.

And that’s when she sings — in this production — “Where Am I Going?” But why exactly does she need to get a mirror and take a good look at herself, as the lyrics suggest? Of course we don’t want Charity to let herself be taken advantage of by men who treat her poorly. But she hasn’t done that once in the entire second act. Oscar may have chickened out on happiness at the last moment, but before that he’s been a real gentleman, sweet and kind and unlike all the other guys in her life, he pays the tab (or at least goes Dutch). Charity has ALREADY taken a look at herself, been honest with the first man in her life worthy of it and left behind the life of prostitution (or so she thought). So what does she need to do? Lose the optimism and open-heartedness that is her most endearing feature?

Foster gives this final scene passion and all her chops, nicely playing off and deepening the plucky Broadway persona she cruised to stardom with. But if they really wanted to rattle her and us, they would have restored the movie’s climax where the one guy we actually thought was nice ends up stealing all her savings again, just like the others.

Mostly, the tech elements let her down, from the ok choreography to the costumes that range from alright (I never really took to Charity’s main little dress and how it hung on the adorable Foster) to the ugly (that beatnik spoof in which they looked less like bohemians and more like hobos). It’s inevitable that the modest, all-female band holding forth above the stage would lack the brassy punch of a full Broadway orchestra (especially on the unfortunately named “I’m A Brass Band”), but happily Mary-Mitchell Campbell’s inventive orchestrations didn’t leave me wanting.

Foster is in better luck with her co-stars. Hensley handles the comic nuttiness of his claustrophobia just as easily as the gentle courtship that follows. They should however simply change Oscar’s age from 38 to 48 to match his real age more nearly — it would only make his bachelorhood more poignant. Mind you, if we’re meant to think Charity has made a mistake even with this guy, a sense of slipperiness or any idea of too-good-to-be-true might be called for. However, I doubt the book or his songs could justify that take.

They’re good together but the most convincing and adult moments are the brief but sharp scenes between

Charity and her co-workers, especially pals played by Asmeret Ghebremichael and Emily Padgett, who shine on “Baby, Dream Your Dream.” In a smart move, four different roles — the movie star, the club’s manager and others — are all given to the same actor, Joel Perez, who makes the most of his opportunity. If there’s a scene-stealer here, I’d say it’s him. Indeed all the chorus is focused, right down to the versatile Cody Williams, who has several speaking parts and also creates specific roles even when not speaking, like a nasty customer who is subtly rough with the girls to a gay nightclub denizen and a nervous teenager, all of them put across with ease when he’s not dancing with the same flair as Darius Barnes and the rest.

So passion is on display but it’s at cross-purposes. It’s more apparent than ever that a lot of the songs may be fun but they’re not exactly deep or even focused very much on Charity and her world. We’re left with a musical that — as written — is at odds with the musical Silverman and Foster would prefer. Their talent is enough to make it watchable, the songs good enough to make it hummable but there isn’t a way to bridge the gulf between what Simon and Coleman and Fields and Fosse created back in 1966 and what Silverman and Foster wish it were today.

MOUSE: THE PERSISTENCE OF AN UNLIKELY THOUGHT *** 1/2 out of ****

ST. ANN’S WAREHOUSE

Just...go. If you enjoy theater — and it needn’t be of the BAM or St. Ann’s Warehouse, thrillingly cutting-edge variety — but just enjoy a jolly good evening of entertainment, go see the UK artist Daniel Kitson’s latest.

Has it been only five years since I and everyone else was floored by his show *The Interminable Suicide Of Gregory Church*? He’s been a constant, welcome presence in New York ever since — bringing further theatrical ventures from across the pond, hosting an evening of stand-up acts in a crumbling VFW hall, wafting over the airwaves with a radio broadcast (if “wafting over the airwaves” applies to a radio show that streams on the internet) and even doing his own stand-up comedy for a full evening, which unfortunately is the one facet of his work I’ve missed to date. For all I know, he’s also dashing off sculptures in his spare time when not writing code to protect and promote internet neutrality. If he does, the code is undoubtedly the wittiest, most elegant, complex and fun to read coding of the year.

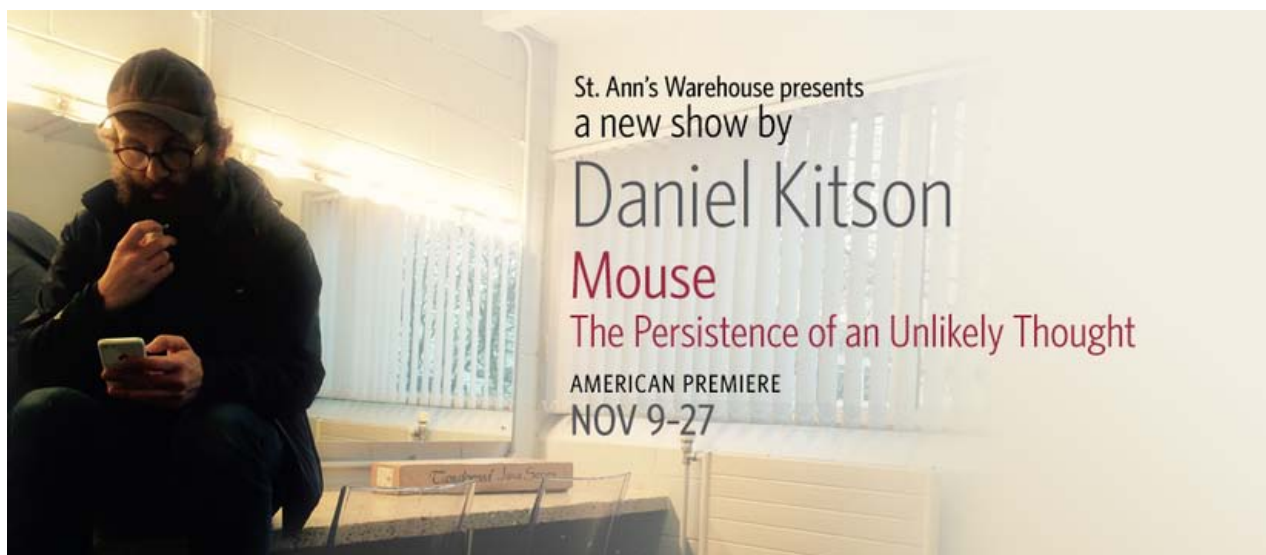
What does he do in these one-man extravaganzas? Well, in his story shows like *Mouse: The Persistence Of An Unlikely Thought*, Kitson deftly combines three distinct strands of performance into one event that can only be described as Kitsonian. And like porn, you know it when you see it. This includes the form of a monologue or tale a la Spalding Gray (though not overtly autobiographical). It also weaves in drama, though instead of another actor Kitson often employs technology of one sort or another to introduce other voices. And finally, at rare unexpected moments Kitson uses the improv skills of his stand-up to give the audience a good shake, snap them to attention and have fun with the unexpected moments that make up live theater — such as Kitson spilling a drink or an audience member dozing off.

(If you like to pretend you are invisible to actors when attending the theater, think again. They hear every

crinkle of the candy you're unwrapping and invariably they glance at you when you "rest your eyes" for one soul-crushing moment. Kitson paused the piece several times on the night I attended, asking one man what was distracting him and asking another with delight if Kitson was imagining it or he'd actually moved into a different seat. Actors see you as easily as you see them. Behave yourself.)

This time, the show begins with Kitson standing at the back of the stage as two walls slowly converge in front of him. For Kitson, this is as dramatic and flashy a special effect as the helicopter in *Miss Saigon*. What we then see is the rather spartan interior of a warehouse or shed, clearly set up with a desk and other modest amenities. The phone rings, Kitson rushes back in and we're off. After a bit of confusion about who called whom, we learn several things: our protagonist is a writer who uses the warehouse for a quiet work space, the caller on the other end sounds oddly like our hero (though the writer insists their voices have distinct if subtle differences), they both enjoy a good banter and all the caller need do is show interest in the story to keep the writer on the phone.

The writer has been wrestling with this story for a dozen years, which also is what Kitson has said about the play we're watching. The writer's story is about a lonely woman who sees a mouse on the stairs when leaving her home. Oddly, she begins to talk to it and then even more oddly she believes the mouse is talking back. Well, not literally talking back — this isn't a magical mouse; don't be silly. But it very deliberately blinks responses to her questions, once for yes and twice for no in time-honored fashion. The woman has somewhere to be but the more she talks to this mouse, the more she can't help herself and of course the more committed she becomes to the conversation the more difficult it becomes to stop because if she stops she's admitting that what she has done is a bit mad. That is, unless the mouse really *is* communicating with her, which isn't possible of course. Right?



So what you have is a man onstage telling a story about a man in a warehouse telling a story to a stranger on a phone about a woman talking to a mouse. That voice on the other end of the phone is also Kitson's and you can't help thinking how challenging or tiresome that must be, to enact night after night a set routine where

little to no variation is allowed for minutes at a time because obviously the tape can't pause or react in the moment. Kitson loves to set himself technical challenges like that since it's often a set of rules or restrictions that create a space in which artistry can flourish.

The architecture of the piece is quite breathtaking when you step back. But in the moment you're just blissfully entertained, whether it's the sheer pleasure of his performance, the layered way in which he tells a story or how he takes E.M. Forster to heart and connects damn near everything by the finale. Perhaps every play is autobiographical and certainly here one fancies Kitson is taking stock as he approaches forty, wondering about what might have been if life had gone just a bit differently.

For all I know he has two sister-wives and ten children but one gets the impression he is single. I do know he's lost weight over these five years of traveling back and forth to America from his home in the UK. I do believe he's become an even more accomplished stage performer. And I know his body of work grows increasingly impressive. This is the fifth theatrical piece in five years and I'd rank them as "brilliant" (*The Interminable Suicide of Gregory Church*), "very good" (*It's Always Right Now, Until It's Later*), "concerning" a bit since he seemed to be repeating himself aka "is it all downhill from here?" (*Analog.Ue*), "whew! bloody wonderful again and this should be turned into a lovely independent film" (*A Show For Christmas*) and "he's in it for the long-haul, one-of-the-best-of-the-year good" (*Mouse*).

If you're keeping track at home, that's four winners out of five, which doesn't even include his stand-up, various other shows in stages of completion he has performed around the world or the key earlier shows I haven't seen yet. As if that isn't laudable enough, Kitson is the Garth Brooks, nay the Pearl Jam of one-man theatrical wizardry. Even when being staged at a top-notch venue like St. Ann's Warehouse with no expense spared (did I mention the sliding doors), the tickets are \$30 and under. And when they're works in progress or stand-up or for charity, they're often even less.

In other words, long after he could be raking it in and doing adverts on the telly and churning out stand-up shows for some streaming service and charging \$125 to the landed gentry for his arty shows at fancy spaces, Kitson has proven almost saintly (I swear there's a glow about this man) — no, drop the "almost," he has *proven* saintly in his devotion to creating works of substance and making them accessible and affordable to one and all. See him once and you'll be a convert forever.

P.S. Or you could just sign up for his emails. They're damn amusing and chances are if you enjoy their footnoted cheekiness, you'll enjoy him.

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 Whishaw) ***

Bright Star **

She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***

Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***

RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2

Nathan The Wise ** 1/2

The Father **

American Psycho **

Waitress ** 1/2

Fully Committed ** 1/2

Long Day's Journey Into Night ***

A Streetcar Named Desire (w Gillian Anderson) ***

Tuck Everlasting **

War **

Paramour * 1/2

Troilus & Cressida (Shakespeare in the Park) ** 1/2

Cats (on Broadway, 2016 revival) **

The Encounter (Complicite on Broadway) **

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (at Two River Theater) ***

Oh, Hello ** 1/2

Heisenberg ** 1/2

The Dudleys ** 1/2

Holiday Inn * 1/2

A Life ** 1/2

Love Love Love ** 1/2

The Radicalization Of Rolfe (FringeFest NYC) ** 1/2

Sweat * 1/2

The Death of The Last Black Man In The Whole Entire World aka The Negro Book Of The Dead ***

Falsettos **

Dead Poets Society ** 1/2

Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812 *** (but ** 1/2 if you've seen it before)

Sweet Charity (w Sutton Foster) **

Mouse: The Persistence Of An Unlikely Thought *** 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.