



THE BLOG 03/17/2016 01:26 am ET | Updated Mar 17, 2017

Theater: Bluegrass 'Robber,' Lonergan's Return, 'Blackbird' Revival, 'Disaster' Is



By Michael Giltz

THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM *** out of ****

HOLD ON TO ME DARLING *** out of ****

BLACKBIRD ** 1/2 out of ****

DISASTER! * out of ****

THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM out of ****

ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY AT THE LAURA PELS THEATRE

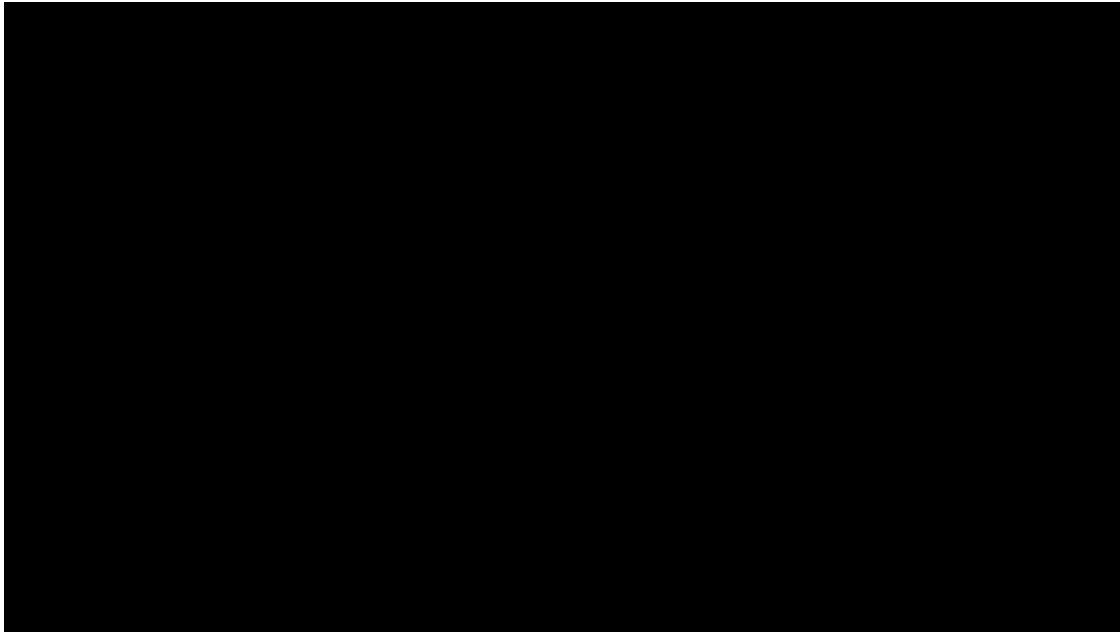
Critics answer one simple question, for starters: how did they like the show? They're supposed to have an objective, long-sighted answer about that performance specifically, the production on hand and the work of art as it may or may not be performed in the past or years to come. So it's easy to overlook the context. Was the critic rushed and late to the show, feeling unsettled? Did the critic have a bad day? Has the illness or death of someone the critic knows made them especially open to being moved by a show where a character dies? Or did the critic just really need a good laugh?

Coming two days after seeing the exhausting musical comedy *Disaster!*, the performance I saw of *The Robber Bridegroom* seemed like *Oklahoma*, *My Fair Lady* and *Guys & Dolls* wrapped up into one. It's not that good (no show is), but this 1975 Americana-steeped musical is a lark with nothing on its mind but entertainment, a goal it achieves with ease. It helps to have Alex Timbers directing with fluid cleverness and a game, talented cast led by Steven Pasquale in charm overdrive as the title rogue.

Based on a novella by Eudora Welty, it features the protagonist Jamie Lockhart, a handsome devil who seems wholesome and true by day but proves to be a wholesome but true highway robber by night. He stumbles across a wealthy man named Clement Musgrove (Lance Roberts), foils lesser villains preying on the fellow and is so intrigued by the man's kindness (and money), that Jamie plays the long con. He decides to leave Musgrove his money, play the hero and woo Rosamund (Ahna O'Reilly), the man's daughter who is reportedly beautiful and sole heir to a vast fortune, which can only add to her lustre.

Complications ensue. Musgrove's wife Salome (Leslie Kritzer) is a scheming step-mother to Rosamund and would love to see her offed. Unfortunately, she hires the dimwitted Goat (Greg Hildreth) to accomplish the deed. Also mucking up plans is the petty robber Little Harp (Andrew Durand) who was frustrated in his crimes by the Robber Bridegroom's appearance and vows revenge. As if that weren't enough, both Jamie and

Rosamund disguise themselves at various points. So Jamie has no idea the girl he stumbled across in the forest is the very same Rosamund he plans to marry for her money and Rosamund has no idea the lovable robber she romances in the woods is the same man as the gold-digging Lothario her father would have her wed. Shakespeare would be proud.



It's easy to see why this frolic of a show is popular in community theater around the country. Pulitzer Prize winner Alfred Uhry did the book and lyrics while Robert Waldman did the music and it's almost designed to be foolproof amateur theatrics. The show has a sprightly pace, broadly drawn characters, comic songs that aren't hugely taxing and can be declaimed and everyone would have fun seeing friends and neighbors trodding the boards.

Of course, we aren't dealing with amateurs here. *The Robber Bridegroom* may be easy to do decently but it's not easy to do this well. The talent on display and Timber's direction vastly elevate the pleasing material with great wit and panache. The sense of fun begins at the start with musicians and actors flooding onto the stage from the audience and basically never lets up. A hundred small touches enliven the presentation and I've no idea where the cues in the original book end and this production's additions begin. Does it matter? Not when you're having fun. All the tech elements, from the costumes to the adaptable set to the many, many wigs add to the fun with their playful inventiveness.

Pasquale offers the proper rakish magnetism as our hero and he's matched by O'Reilly, from her sweet voice to her heroic action when danger threatens. You won't find a weak performance here and everyone is doing double or triple duty, from playing instruments to moving props. But unquestionably Kritzer is tearing it up as the evil and salacious Salome. It's a panto villain worthy of the best West End holiday show and god help us if any tourists see her work and decide to go BIG the next time they mount *The Robber Bridegroom* for their local community theater. In other words, don't try this high-wire of an act at home, kids. Kritzer is dangerously

funny here but for most anyone else who's not a professional with her level of talent, this much mugging would simply be dangerous.

HOLD ON TO ME DARLING *** out of ****

ATLANTIC THEATRE COMPANY AT THE LINDA GROSS THEATER

After the long nightmare of post-production on the movie *Margaret* and the quickly disappearing *Medieval Play*, one might have easily feared that Kenneth Lonergan would become gun-shy. Not at all, apparently, His new movie *Manchester By The Sea* is clearly one of the event films of 2016 after opening to universal acclaim at the Sundance Film Festival. And now here comes his new play *Hold On To Me Darling*. Like *Medieval Play*, it seems to toy with genre, in this case Hollywood comedies of the 1940s a la Preston Sturges. The play is defiantly expansive at two hours and forty minutes and just as shaggy and unpredictable and distinctive as one expects from Lonergan. Thank goodness!

Strings McCrane is a hugely popular country star -- indeed, he's the third biggest country cross-over act in musical history! (Which places him behind Garth Brooks and Shania Twain, I think, unless they just mean the third biggest crossover act today which would rank him behind Carrie Underwood and uh, somebody else. Hey, I love country music!) McCrane is embodied with sex appeal to spare by Timothy Olyphant (of *Deadwood* and *Justified*). Strings is essentially a self-absorbed bit of nonsense who constantly claims he wants to get away from it all and rediscover his roots. But really, he just wants a fling in the sack and a break from the treadmill of fame. Or so it seems.

The tabloids are stalking Strings as always, this time because he's got a superstar bride-to-be (actually, they barely know each other) and a funeral to attend. His momma has died and Strings is headed back home to where people are "real." Why doesn't he toss all this fame and fortune aside, all the movies and music and touring and adoration? Why not head back home, get a house, buy the local feed store with his brother Duke (a very funny and droll C.J. Wilson) and stand behind the counter and take care of customers? Well, because it's crazy, that's why.

Hold On To Me Darling zigs and zags in unexpected directions. Some scenes are just plain funny, but rooted in character. Others fly off into the ether. Still others are unexpectedly real.

We begin in a hotel room where Strings is getting a massage to relax before heading back home for his mom's funeral. Jenn Lyon as Nancy is hilariously good here as the hotel employee who is floored when her musical idol is sporting his underwear and nothing else other than an "aw shucks darlin'" attitude. (They make love, of course.) Olyphant almost plays a song on a guitar here, which leads to a good joke when Nancy practically jumps at the chance to sing for him. Still, can Olyphant sing? It would have helped tremendously to have Strings sing briefly here, letting us immediately know that for all his goofiness when it comes to the music that Strings is the real deal. Or not, but at least we'd know and that would help us get a fix on this guy.

Another scene takes place at the funeral and Nancy pops up again. They've only known each other three days but she's already morphed into a knowing girlfriend with her eye on the prize of snagging a wedding ring when not manipulating everyone around Strings to her own benefit. For a moment, Nancy seemed so completely different from the person we'd just met, I honestly thought Lyon was playing a different character, maybe his Hollywood girlfriend we never meet.

Another scene in the den of Duke's house is also explosively funny. But we also get scenes of quiet sweetness featuring a distant cousin named Essie (a lovely Adelaide Clemens) who was very close to String's mom in the last few years before she died. By the end, I felt I'd experienced five or six very good scenes that each might have taken place in five or six entirely different shows. I went for the ride all the way but it was a little bumpy.



Photo by Doug Hamilton

Director Neil Pepe helms the show with a lightly confident touch that makes the swings in mood go down easy, aided by strong technical work, especially a revolving set by Walt Spangler that works a charm.

Olyphant doesn't have a lot of stage work under his belt and it shows. He has charisma to spare and lands the laughter time and again. But physically he seemed a little ill at ease at times, his body seeming to get in the way of his performance. That will surely improve over the run and he definitely has the chops to deliver, though breaking character and laughing is amusing but not ideal for a show of this sort, as he did the night I saw it. (Actually, it happened with another actor as well, rather atypically for the theater.) He is, by and large, a significant asset. The rest of the cast, including Keith Nobbs as the sycophantic assistant, are ideal.

But the parts are so good I wanted the whole to be better. Do they want the comedy to be more pronounced? Then surely the show should be paced quicker and some of the repetitive comments of Strings eliminated. Do they want to slide into more serious territory? Then surely the scenes could be juggled or refined in some way to make that move into drama work better. (A late scene with Jimmy and Nancy feuding is slowly paced and falls flat, for example. Its surreal silliness pulls us out of the new territory the show is claiming.)

Personally, I wasn't really wondering what made Strings a self-absorbed guy who is incapable of committing to a serious relationship guy. I assumed that's the default-mode of superstars, especially ones in very funny comedies. Nonetheless, a piercing, quiet, beautifully acted final scene seemed to "explain" Strings and why he was broken inside. It didn't come out of nowhere exactly -- the earlier scenes with Strings' cousin Nessie

were similarly sweet and more real than the rest of the show. But after a lot of riotous humor, I wasn't looking for the heartrending finale we got. I love feeling sucker-punched by emotion and this scene is a doozy, truly. I just wish I didn't feel a little like it was the finale to a different play. If they want to lead up to this ending (and they should, since it's great), then the rest of the show should deserve it more.

Maybe it just needs to be on its feet for a while. This is a rich, complicated work and it will surely benefit from more performances under its belt. I would dearly love to see *Hold On To Me Darling* at the end of its run just to see what it's become. Still, while I hate to bring up editing post-*Margaret*, perhaps getting to see it in front of an audience will encourage some thoughtful tinkering from Lonergan with input from all involved. What I do know is that Lonergan is an artist. I wouldn't miss his next play for the world.

BLACKBIRD ** 1/2 out of ****

BELASCO THEATRE

It's a strange thing to see a revival when so many people -- including your guest -- have such strong opinions about the original show, the play itself and this new production. I came to *Blackbird* fresh, knowing only the basics. A man at work named Ray (Jeff Daniels) is confronted by a younger woman named Una (Michelle Williams) in a conference room. While it would be nice to know absolutely nothing more (stop now if you're going to the show!) pretty much everyone I think is aware Ray molested Una when she was just a little girl. A twelve year old girl, to be exact.

Few people are as rightly vilified as child molesters. We may enjoy noble serial killers like Dexter but no one sees pedophiles in a sympathetic light. But playwright David Harrower toys with our natural desire to learn more and understand pretty much anyone, even child molesters. Was Una the only child Ray molested? Did she flirt with him, assuming one can even call the actions of a 12 year old child flirting? Did he cultivate her? Did she go "willingly?" Did he abandon her? Did she flee him? Did he do it out of fear? Remorse? Or did he love her, or think he loved her?

If they started a relationship all these years later as consenting adults, would that make a difference to how we saw the crime he committed all those years ago? Or is Una too damaged by what Ray did to take anything that happens between them today with anything other than a giant asterisk? And why do we need details anyway? Why are we still listening and why do we have questions of our own? Are questions even right?



Photo by Brigitte Lacombe

Blackbird is a tense showdown between two characters and our feelings inevitably seesaw back and forth as we learn about what precisely happened all those years ago, even if our brain insists on reminding ourselves, "It doesn't matter; what he did was wrong."

I am intrigued by people who have been molested and yet are reluctant or refuse to see themselves as victims. A friend of mine who had sex with two adults when he was 13 (and they were in their 20s) insisted to me he wanted to have sex with them and it didn't harm him in the least. I was silly to suggest otherwise when I said a 13 year old *can't* consent to sex. In the excellent new memoir *My Father, The Pornographer*, author Chris Offutt veers off into a story about being molested as a kid. But he scoffs at the suggestion he too was a victim, even after detailing how lonely and vulnerable he was and how a creepy Fat Man wooed him with treats and erotica, paid him for sex and then tried repeatedly to talk Offutt into making a gay porn movie. You see, Offutt went back after that first time so how could anyone say he was a victim, he argues?

I think it's likely I enjoyed this particular production more because I hadn't seen the original. I admire Williams greatly as a film actor and hope she continues working on the stage. Still, I sensed she was making a rather out-there choice in her portrayal of Una, who here seems in full melt-down mode from the beginning of the play. She's so manic and mannered, right down to an odd accent, that I was uncertain how to take almost anything she said. One can't accuse Williams of making timid choices here. Daniels is perhaps even more ideal for his role today, being older and inherently more desperate seeming with age. (A younger, trimmer man would seem too appealing in a way.) He's so nervous and threatened and seemingly the stable one here that it's a good way to woo us to Ray's perspective.

Certainly, it's an 80 minute rollercoaster of a play, but this *Blackbird* starts at such a fever pitch it never gets to modulate or lull us into a false sense of complicity. There are no dips and slow approaches to a fast descent. It's just one long plunge into darkness. For me, this production makes *Blackbird* feel more like a one-time ride,

rather than the more complex drama it perhaps was before and might be again in the future.

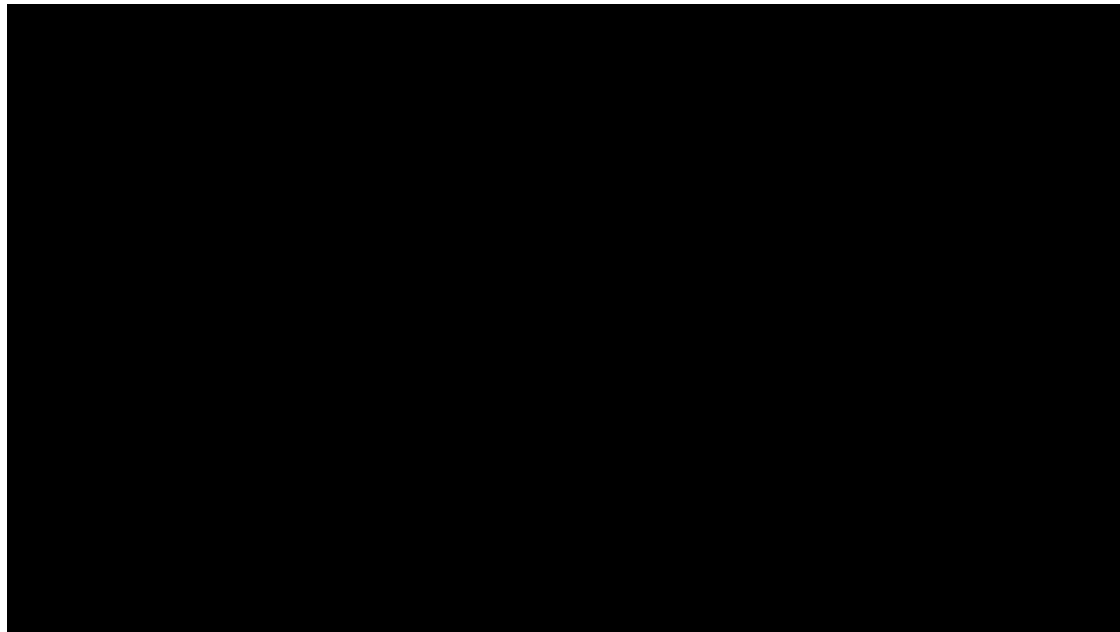
DISASTER! * out of ****

NEDERLANDER THEATRE

"Hey, they're only trying to entertain! Why be so hard on it?" Not on your life, buster! That attitude implies that comedies, silly spoofs and other diversions are "lesser" forms of entertainment held to a lower standard. That attitude is wrong, as is the lazy excuse for a musical that is *Disaster!*, a show that wouldn't cut it for \$10 bucks Off Off Broadway and certainly doesn't deserve a pass for making it on Broadway.

It's a spoof of 1970s disaster flicks with a healthy infusion of disco-era pop songs to liven things up. Set on a floating casino off Manhattan that's about to fall prey to an unprecedented earthquake, *Disaster!* has everything fans of *The Towering Inferno* and *Airport* would expect. You've got the older couple in love, a craven coward who cuts corners to realize his dream of riches, a nun, children in peril, two beautiful young people who will realize their passion amidst all the danger and so on.

The book is by Seth Rudetsky (who brings the requisite seriousness to the role of the Cassandra-like Professor Ted Scheider) and Jack Plotnick (who also directs). The two-bit sets are by Tobin Ost (what's he supposed to do with \$50?), the obvious costumes by William Ivey Long and so on and so forth. It also has a very starry cast, including Roger Bart as the scheming businessman, Rachel York as his mostly ignored gal, Kerry Butler as the crusading journalist, Adam Pascal as her one-time boyfriend, Faith Prince as half of the happy senior citizen couple secretly plagued with a debilitating disease, and even minor parts are played by the talented likes of Manoel Felciano. God, it's depressing.



The worst part of the show is the use of music, which makes *Rock Of Ages* seem like Pulitzer Prize material in

comparison. That show trafficked in 1980s rock n roll of the head-banging sort. But they loved those songs and their affection was demonstrated by singing them with heart and passion. *Disaster!* seems to mock its music. Very few songs are sung even half the way through without interruption. Most of the time a song is just a cheap punchline: a situation ham-handedly leads to a line of dialogue that leads to someone singing a line or two from a song which is supposed to make you laugh because the 1970s guilty pleasure *fits right into the scene!*

It's humor of the most banal sort and about the only humor the show attempts. What's really annoying is how again and again they sing a line or two, stop, then sing another line or two and then move on. It's like having someone keep their hand on a radio dial, always changing the station again and again so that you never hear a single song all the way through. By the time they got to the bathos of "Feelings," a nadir of 1970s music if ever there was one, I immediately realized the dumb play on words that was going to amount to the punchline. Still I wished they would just sing the entire damn song for once. Nope. They piped the classic original songs out front of the theater and I had more fun hearing Barry Manilow's version of "Daybreak" playing while I waited to enter than I did during the entire evening inside.

As my guest said, "They didn't even try!" And he *loves* silly, campy nonsense. Amidst all the creative wreckage both real and inspired, two performers actually rise above it all to deliver enjoyable performances. It's not because their roles are better written than the rest or that they're more talented. (The show is bursting with talent, after all, albeit of the wasted variety.) But their roles have nice twists that make them feel fresh, they get to deliver almost complete songs at key moments (allowing them to shine the way few others are permitted) and their humor is based on character, not trotting out an old cliché or forced situations leading up to forced segues into old songs they can't even be bothered to sing completely.

Jennifer Simard unquestionably walks away with the show as Sister Mary Downy. She delivers every line of dialogue at a low mumble, to somehow hilarious effect. And Simard sings a medley of "Torn Between Two Lovers" and "Never Can Say Goodbye" while desperately trying to control her lust for gambling. It's all sung to a slot machine she practically mounts and it's very funny. She's a welcome presence throughout. If only the rest of the show had striven to be original and used songs in an amusing but heartfelt manner rather than as a dull rimshot. (Typically, one character told another to knock knock knock on wood and then she sang... oh, you get it. To be fair, I anticipated a character in another room to say "Knock three times on the ceiling if you want me," so I guess they surprised me there. That was about it for the evening's suspense.)

The other lucky survivor of this indifferent evening? Young Baylee Littrell making his Broadway debut as the twins Ben and Lisa. He too gets to sing a few songs practically all the way through, including Michael Jackson's ode to a rat "Ben" and another number where he actually sings along with himself in an amusing, low-tech solution to how both siblings played by the same actor could be onstage at the same time. Somehow his constant need to run off stage and return as one or the other kid remained an amusing conceit, reminding us that yes, indeed, we're perfectly happy to go along with some nonsense. But nonsense with a little spark of imagination, not a by-the-numbers sketch comedy mentality that wouldn't have cut the mustard for a segment on *The Carol Burnett Show* 40 years ago.

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! *

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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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Michael Giltz □

Freelance writer

