

## Theater: Brassy Bette, Pallid Pippin, Precious Pearl & Frozen Walt

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**I'LL EAT YOU LAST** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**PIPPIN** \* out of \*\*\*\*

**THIS SIDE OF NEVERLAND** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**A PUBLIC READING OF AN UNPRODUCED SCREENPLAY ABOUT THE DEATH OF WALT DISNEY** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

May is when one season of theater ends and another begins. Awards are handed out and some new shows appear after biding their time by waiting for the crush of Tony hopefuls to thin out. So here I'll catch up on two final shows from the Broadway season: Bette Midler's return to the stage and a lauded revival of *Pippin*. That's followed by two far more promising indications of the season to come: a delightful evening of one acts by the Pearl Theatre Company and a new play by one of the most promising writers around.

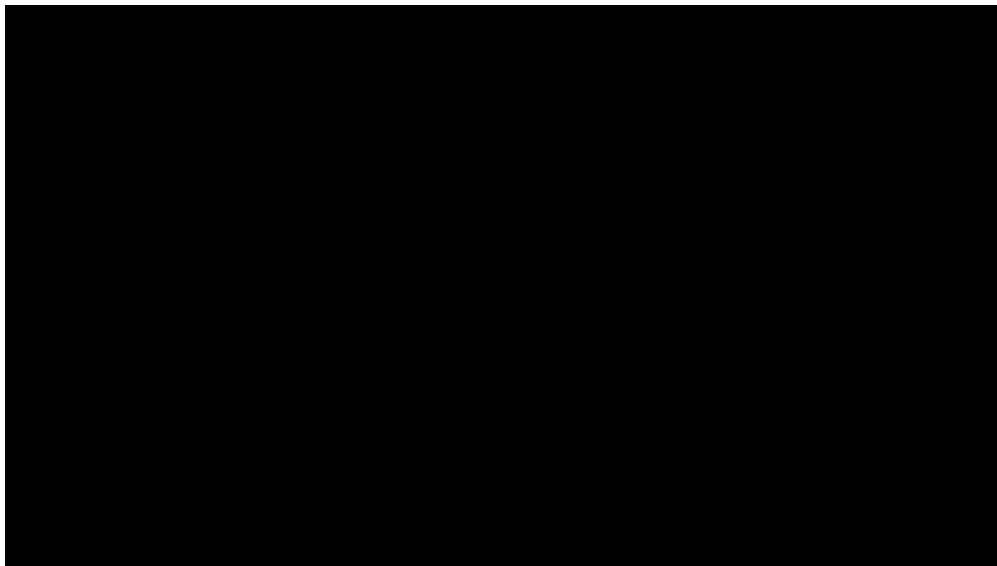
**I'LL EAT YOU LAST** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**BOOTH THEATRE**

What a treat to see Bette Midler up close and personal in a one-woman show that suits her to a t. If you want to see the Divine Miss M dish a little dirt and have a little fun playing super-agent Sue Mengers -- another larger than life personality -- by all means do what you can to see *I'll Eat You Last*. You won't be disappointed.

The play itself is a trifle by John Logan barely worth discussing. Mengers was a super agent of the old school, a brassy pioneering woman who broke her way into the business and loved, loved, loved every minute of it -- cursing on the phone at a studio chief, wooing stars, hosting parties with all her twinklies (her nickname for celebs) and generally having a blast. Mengers was so unique she even enjoyed a profile on *60 Minutes*.

Here we see Mengers holding court on her couch hours before she's to host another party. It's the fateful day Barbra Streisand fired her longtime friend Mengers, a blow Mengers never really recovered from though she knew getting fired was always part of the game. It's late afternoon and the sun slowly sets as Mengers tells her tale -- from a chubby little German Jewish immigrant whose bravest act was to cross the school playground and talk to the popular girls to the would-be actress who found her calling by discovering the talent in others and selling it to directors and studios and the media.



The set by Scott Pask is handsome and director Joe Mantello smartly works with

Midler to develop a real performance when she might have just put her own brassy spin on well-worn anecdotes from Mengers' career. But Midler is a Broadway baby who appeared in *Fiddler On The Roof* for three years as one of her early big breaks. She just sits on a couch but she also works hard to make each slump, each pause, each decision to lean forward or slip to the side actually be driven by the text. She might have coasted but instead Midler works hard and delivers soundly. I won't quite say she was robbed since this season saw so many good female performances but now that I've seen the show I'm even more surprised she wasn't recognized by the Tonys.

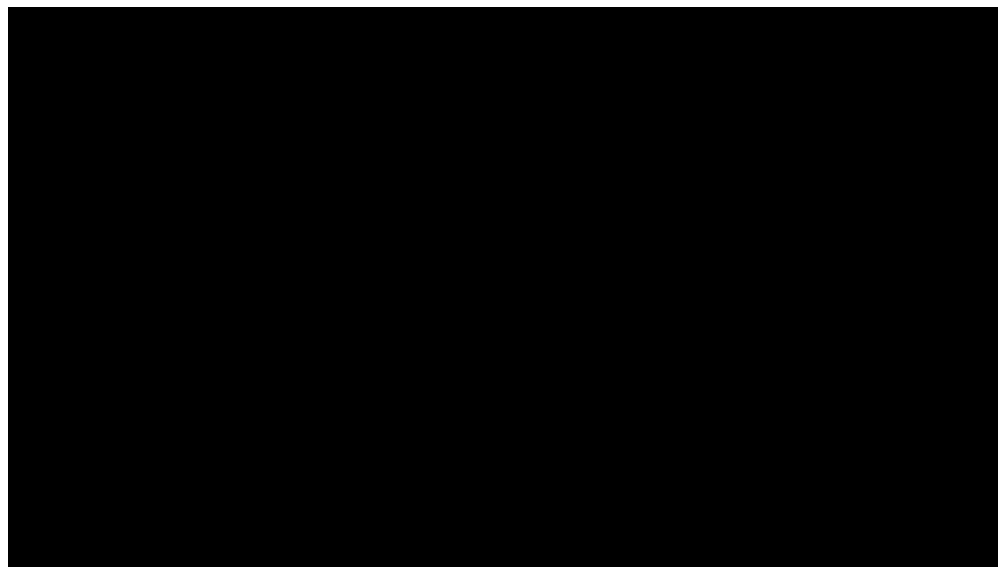
As for the show? They got that one right by ignoring it. You get a fair amount of laughs but those all come courtesy of Mengers. The best anecdote revolves around actress Ali McGraw and how Mengers was actually human enough to recognize that some things are more important than a movie career. (A rare trait indeed, in Hollywood.) But the setting, the platitudes, the late afternoon to the dark of night time frame all feel by the numbers and obvious. Mengers was far more complicated and interesting than that. Logan scratches the surface and nothing more. Midler, happily, digs as deep as she can.

### **PIPPIN \* out of \*\*\*\* THE MUSIC BOX**

I'd never seen *Pippin* before, just heard about its legendary Broadway run in the 1970s that featured choreography by Bob Fosse and turned Ben Vereen into a star. Why I wondered was it never revived? Now I know.

This flimsy excuse for a show -- young prince wants to see the world and find some real purpose in life -- must have seemed dated even as it ended its four and a half year run in 1977. Director Diane Paulus took a similar time capsule of a show called *Hair* and found some magic in it. However, that show had better songs and the backdrop of Vietnam to give its soul searching some context. Pippin's score by Stephen Schwartz is notably weak with only "Corner Of The Sky," "Moonglow" and the ditty "No Time At All" leaving any impression at all. Even that is undercut by the fact that Pippin himself (Matthew James Thomas) is no belter, try as he might.

The book by Roger O. Hirson is a mish mash that feels more like a sketch than a proper story. The scenic design by Scott Pask and especially the costumes by Dominique Lemieux are uniformly ugly. I didn't like it. If you're an ardent fan of this show from your childhood, a return visit might prove a rude awakening. If you've never seen it, you're forewarned.



Surrounding the story is a non-stop circus of tumblers and acrobats and the like. My guest wondered what the heck the point of it was. But obviously if all you had to watch was the story itself, the baldness of the material would be even more apparent. Still, it's nothing you haven't seen in the first five minutes of any Cirque Du Soleil show. (They're credited to Gypsy Snider.)

While all that jumping and juggling is going on, the Leading Player (Patina Miller) is narrating the story of Pippin and repeatedly promising a finale you will never forget. Miller starred in *Sister Act* on Broadway, a woeful show that I felt she somehow rose above. Perhaps the shadow of that Fosse choreography (here the choreography is by Chet Walker "in the style of Bob Fosse") and Vereen's legendary turn have frozen her. Miller's steely charm in *Sister Act* now seems just like icy reserve. You feel she's

mechanically recreating someone else's performance rather than delivering her own and the result is a chilly, charismatic-free vacuum at the heart of the show.

Pippin is no help since he's a bland, petulant teenager, who whines like college students everywhere that he wants to do something meaningful with his life. On the other hand, he doesn't want to do any actual work either, proves incompetent at running the government when given the chance, feels constrained by home life when taken in by a widow with a son and frankly looks bored to tears by a night of debauchery. This Pippin doesn't look remotely interested in any women (or men) during the "sexy" scenes of him drinking and drugging and exploring the pleasures of the flesh. Pippin is at heart a neutered, bland character and that naturally drags the show down.

Truly, it's hard to discuss such a half-hearted plot. There's a brief storyline that the king's new wife (Charlotte d'Ambroise) wants to supplant Pippin and place her son on the throne, but the issue is raised and then nothing comes of it. Pippin takes one truly decisive action -- he kills his father the King (a by-the-numbers Terrence Mann) because he believes the king is corrupt and the system needs to be changed. But then after a very brief bit of political satire, the show just brings the king back to life and pretends it never happened. Pippin rejects the comforts of home life but then longs for it again, a reversal that might have more impact if it didn't happen practically in the same breath.

*Pippin* has one saving grace and it's Andrea Martin. She has a show-stopping turn as Pippin's grandmother Berthe. Martin tells Pippin to have a little fun for goodness sake and then sings the inspirational, times-a-wastin' song "No Time At All." It's presented as a sing-along and Martin -- a legend from *SCTV* in top form - has fun playing with the audience in a no-brainer of a part. But it's when she gets on a trapeze and starts dangling above the audience AND keeps singing that the 66 year old brings the house down.

Throughout the show, the Leading Player interrupts the action and others -- such as the widowed farmwife (Rachel Bay Jones) -- choose not to follow the script. It all builds to the big finale where all the artifice on display is stripped away, the circus tent is pulled down and we're just left with a bare stage. It's meant to be shocking, of course, but you can't strip away an illusion when it never dazzled you in the first place.

**THIS SIDE OF NEVERLAND \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\***  
**THE PEARL THEATRE COMPANY**

When Signature Theatre Company moved to its new home on 42nd St. between ninth and tenth avenue, one had to feel a little sad about the fate of its home farther down the block between tenth and eleventh. It's a wonderful space with a great, intimate theater and thanks to Signature it was bursting with happy memories of excellent shows.

Perhaps the perfect new tenant moved in to carry on the tradition. The Pearl Theatre Company proves again with this diverting entertainment why all theater buffs and casual fans should take a trip to their ideal new home.

*This Side Of Neverland* features two trim, entertaining one-acts by J.M. Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan*. He had a string of successes and they're very much of a piece if these two are any indication. *Rosalind* shows a famed actress enjoying her anonymity in a seaside town where she can act her age, only to have her cover spoiled by an ardent young fan. *The Twelve Pound Look* features a man about to be knighted who discovers his ex-wife has turned up as a secretary to help write the voluminous thank you notes the great day will entail. Each play is narrated by Barrie, each employs a modest twist, and each is a pleasing diversion with some subtle social commentary.

Before the show, the audience is treated to sing-alongs of period tunes like "After The Ball" and "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows" to create the proper old-timey feel. Director J.R. Sullivan captures the right tone, allowing for lots of humor but without losing sight of the serious subtext (aging, the role of women and so on) that makes them just a little more than silly.

Rachel Botchan goes a bit broadly as the actress Mrs. Page in the first piece. But she was terrific in the second piece as Kate, a woman who chose to leave her husband for a sense of independence and self-worth. Botchan was appealing and smart and funny and I retrospectively upgraded my impression of her performance in the first one. If she could be this subtle and believable here then obviously she was choosing to be a bit actress-y in the first one. The rest of the cast was solid in supporting turns with one happy exception. In multiple roles -- the narrator J.M. Barrie, a servant and a befuddled young blue blood in love with the actress -- Sean McNall shines throughout. He deftly created three very different roles all while slipping back and forth between one and the other.

The only off note was a costume choice by Elise M. VanderKley. The actress in the

first piece revels in being frumpy but she's given a potato sack of a dress that is distractingly absurd. A more realistic frock would have been better. Instead it's so bulky and bizarre that it took quite a while to figure out the tone of the piece and what exactly is going on. Costumes that go for jokey effects rarely succeed. It didn't help that her more glamorous costume at the finale was underwhelming as well. Since Botchan looked so much more appealing in the second piece, it's a pity her transformation wasn't more fun in the first.

That's a modest complaint about a night that was well-judged from start to finish. At about 90 minutes, even the decision not to include a third one act was smart; it makes the evening a refreshing, lively and quick diversion that is as good an introduction as any to this company celebrating its 29th season.

**A PUBLIC READING OF AN UNPRODUCED SCREENPLAY ABOUT THE DEATH OF WALT DISNEY** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**SOHO REP**

Just a few months ago, I saw my first play by Lucas Hnath. *Isaac's Eye* was ambitious and smart and funny and has stayed with me. Now with this new show and the acclaim his earlier work has received, it's clear Hnath is a fascinating talent we'll be hearing from for years to come.

This play with it's Kushner-like title is exactly as advertised: four actors sit at a table and do a staged reading of what purports to be a screenplay about the movie mogul and theme park visionary Walt Disney.

It focuses on Walt (Larry Pine); his brother Roy (Frank Wood), who always labored under Walt's shadow; his daughter (Amanda Quaid) and her ex-football player of a husband Ron (Brian Sgambati). Anyone familiar with Disney's life in even broad terms -- or indeed with the life of any self-made mogul -- won't be surprised here. Disney is more focused on work than family, pushes around Roy, manipulates others, confuses success with infallibility and late in life comes up with grandiose schemes that the very company he created is unwilling to back.

The play takes liberties with facts, such as the apparent myth surrounding Walt choosing to freeze his own head via cryogenics, an infamous Oscar-winning nature documentary that was partially staged (Hnath has Roy take the fall when it wasn't even an issue until after they were both dead) and so on. But the heart of it rings true, including Walt's growing obsession with his planned city, a great anecdote about a tree at Walt Disney World he had to accommodate and the back and forth between siblings or parents and children captured with ease.

In smaller roles, Quaid and Sgambati are good. Quaid shines especially in her one big monologue where she explains why she doesn't want to name her son "Walt" after her father. It's the most emotionally devastating scene of the show but she wisely doesn't oversell it. Sgambati is an eager beaver of a son-in-law, not too bright but he knows it and is willing to work hard and learn any lessons Walt is willing to teach.

But it's Wood and Pine that have the most fun. Wood is excellent as the reasonable, doormat of a man Roy. And Pine is superb as Walt, a driven, unhappy fellow. Whether badgering Roy, disdaining Ron, quietly pushing his daughter or extolling his dream of the Experimental Prototype Community Of Tomorrow, Pine captures the self-assured but insecure nature of a man used to having his way and being right so often he's forgotten that he can ever be wrong.

Director Sarah Benson oversees the work with an attention to detail that keeps the many shifts in mood and scene crystal clear, aided by fine tech work all around. But Hnath missed the opportunity to craft a genuine screenplay. That conceit never really takes life. Other than scene changes and occasional references to the camera doing a close up and then moving in even closer on certain characters, the stage directions amount mostly to characters saying "cut to" to move a scene forward a few minutes. It creates an interesting rhythm that Pine mines fully towards the climax.

But it keeps the disparate elements from coming into focus. It's a rather scattershot screenplay, jumping from that nature documentary about lemmings to bouts with his child to repeated pleas by Walt to make the planned city of his imagination come to life. Before you know it, he's dead and we barely feel like we've found our bearings. As good as each scene is, the format of reading a screenplay can't hide the fact that these scenes have not been shaped into a coherent whole. It all takes place during the last ten years of Walt's life but still a tighter, clearer throughline would have helped.

And a screenplay should be visual. Imagine if Hnath had actors delivering descriptions of images, of camera movements and entire scenes that didn't include dialogue but advanced the story and revealed character in ways that couldn't be told any other way. If it doesn't do that, it's not really a screenplay. Instead, the screenplay here remains merely an idea. Happily, with this group of actors and the scenes at hand, Walt does come to life. Now he just needs a more structured, more visual screenplay

from the talented Hnath to give him the show he deserves.

## THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

*As You Like it* (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) \*\*\*\*  
*Chimichangas And Zoloff* \*  
*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  
*The Other Place* \*\* 1/2  
*Picnic* \* 1/2  
*Opus No. 7* \*\* 1/2  
*Deceit* \* 1/2  
*Life And Times Episodes 1-4* \*\*  
*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (w Scarlett Johansson) \* 1/2  
*The Jammer* \*\*\*  
*Blood Play* \*\* 1/2  
*Manilow On Broadway* \*\* 1/2  
*Women Of Will* \*\* 1/2  
*All In The Timing* \*\*\*  
*Isaac's Eye* \*\*\*  
*Bunnicula: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery* \*\* 1/2  
*The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County* \* 1/2  
*Much Ado About Nothing* \*\*\*  
*Really Really* \*  
*Parsifal at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Madrid* \* 1/2  
*The Wild Bride at St. Ann's* \*\* 1/2  
*Passion at CSC* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Carousel at Lincoln Center* \*\*\*  
*The Revisionist* \*\*  
*Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella* \*\*\*  
*Rock Of Ages* \* 1/2  
*Ann* \*\* 1/2  
*Old Hats* \*\*\*  
*The Flick* \*\*\*  
*Detroit '67* \*\* 1/2  
*Howling Hilda* reading \* (Mary Testa \*\*\*)  
*Hit The Wall* \*  
*Breakfast At Tiffany's* \* 1/2  
*The Mound Builders* at Signature \*  
*Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Cirque Du Soleil's Totem* \*\*\*  
*The Lying Lesson* \* 1/2  
*Hands On A Hardbody* \*  
*Kinky Boots* \*\*  
*Matilda The Musical* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream* \*\*\*  
*Motown: The Musical* \*\*  
*La Ruta* \*\* 1/2  
*The Big Knife* \*  
*The Nance* \*\*\*  
*The Assembled Parties* \*\* 1/2  
*Jekyll & Hyde* \* 1/2  
*Thoroughly Modern Millie* \*\* 1/2  
*Macbeth* w Alan Cumming \*  
*Orphans* \*\* 1/2  
*The Testament Of Mary* \*\* 1/2  
*The Drawer Boy* \*\*  
*The Trip To Bountiful* \*\*\*  
*I'll Eat You Last* \*\* 1/2  
*Pippin* \*  
*This Side Of Neverland* \*\*\*  
*A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney* \*\*\*

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. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.*

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