

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Theater: *Breakfast At Tiffany's* Leaves You Hungry; *Vanya, Sonia... Leaves You Laughing*

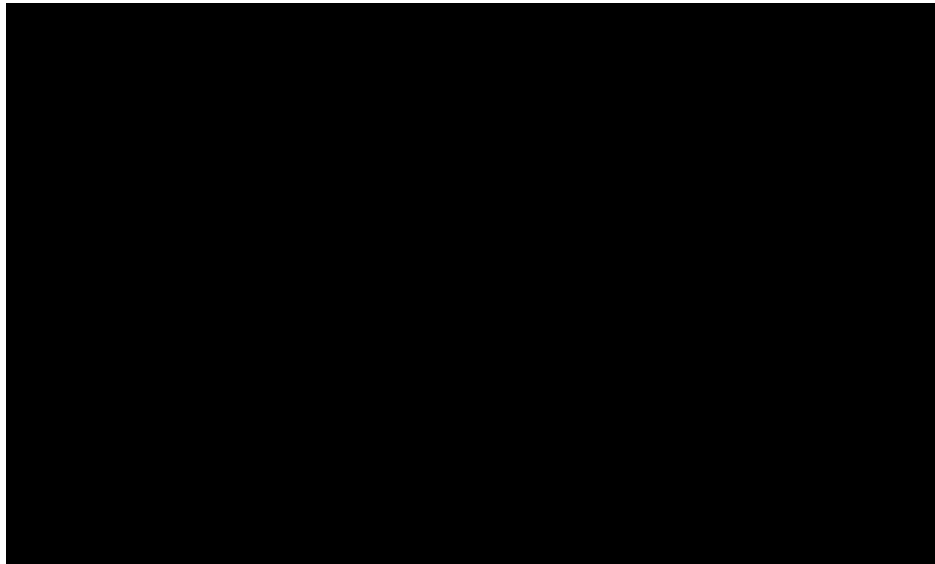
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BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S * 1/2 out of ****
VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE *** 1/2 out of ****
CIRQUE DU SOLEIL'S TOTEM *** out of ****
THE LYING LESSON * 1/2 out of ****

BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S * 1/2 out of ****
CORT THEATRE

Some people cherish the glossy Blake Edwards film *Breakfast At Tiffany's* and Audrey Hepburn's enduring portrayal of Holly Golightly. (Presumably they just ignore Mickey Rooney's horribly dated yellow-face portrayal of an Asian-American neighbor.) Others prefer the darker, more complex novella by Truman Capote. Neither group, sadly, will enjoy the Broadway staging of a play that hopes to combine the glamor of the movie and the richness of the novella but falls short of both.

I can't tell you how many people have asked me or assumed this was a musical, but it's a straight drama. Like the novella, it focuses on Fred (Cory Michael Smith), a struggling writer who is pulled into the orbit of Holly Golightly (Emilia Clarke), a backwoods teenager who has reinvented herself as an intriguing, glamorous figure of high society. Holly is dazzling and fun and irresponsible and determined to keep reinventing herself until she finds someone or somewhere that she likes. Fred is the downstairs neighbor who knows exactly what he wants -- to write and be read -- but he enjoys the transformative friendship Holly offers. It's the eternal story of New York City: people following their dreams and lost souls who follow any dream they can, each one more glittering and improbable than the next.



The adaptation by Richard Greenberg hews closely to the plot of the novella. But essentially this work doesn't lend itself to the theater. Greenberg uses some of the best lines, but words that worked beautifully on the page feel forced onstage. At one point, he quotes almost verbatim this speech Holly makes to a friend (in the play it's directed to another character).

"Never love a wild thing, Mr. Bell. That was Doc's mistake. He was always lugging home wild things. A hawk with a hurt wing. One time it was a full-grown bobcat with a broken leg. But you can't give your heart to a wild thing: the more you do, the stronger they get. Until they're strong enough to run into the woods. Or fly into a tree. Then a taller tree. Then the sky. That's how you'll end up, Mr. Bell. If you let yourself love a wild thing. You'll end up looking at the sky."

It's a key passage in the 75-page work by Capote, the moment when Holly Golightly shows a rare bit of insight into herself and others that isn't calculating. But as dialogue onstage, it's too flatly revealing. Similarly, the major elements of this production -- the scenic design by Derek McLane, the costumes by Colleen Atwood, the lighting by Peter Kaczorowski -- are functional but never inspired.

Of course it's the film that looms over this production since most people haven't read the novella.

Cory Michael Smith has the George Peppard role, though that's misleading since the George Peppard role doesn't exist here. Fred is not a gigolo for women mirroring Holly's kept girl status with men. He's a writer and gay and Holly is his best friend, not

his romantic ideal. Smith was very good in the Off Broadway play *Cock* and holds the stage ably here, quite a good accomplishment since the play is not terribly riveting.

Greenberg has taken the merest suggestion that Fred is gay in the novella and made it a fitful subplot. This would be fine if Greenberg made something of it; perhaps Holly would help Fred accept being gay with her free-spirited nature? Instead, it's just an obvious fact that isn't explored interestingly, even though Fred seems clueless about his own sexuality and later embarrassed by it until it's obvious to all. At the climax, the nude bathtub scene they share is essentially platonic; the journey to that moment is not memorable.

George Wendt brings his avuncular presence and a great deal of goodwill to the smallish role of the bartender Joe Bell. Lee Wilkof as Holly's Hollywood contact shines as much as one can under the circumstances, making a convincing agent and bringing the stage to life whenever he's on it.

But it's Audrey Hepburn above all that one thinks of the moment the words *Breakfast At Tiffany's* are uttered. She was an effortlessly elegant character, a creature of pure whimsy. You could easily imagine the wealthy and powerful men of New York wanting to protect her and care for her and call her their own.

Clarke (very good in HBO's *Game Of Thrones*) has the unenviable task of putting her own stamp on the role in her Broadway debut. Perhaps to avoid comparisons, she and director Sean Mathias seem to have made the wrong-headed choice to emphasize the artifice in Holly Golightly. Hepburn's Holly had reinvented herself but was so charming and elegant, you could almost imagine she was a princess choosing to slum it. Clarke's Holly is far more transparent a make-over, with a voice that strains for elegance but lets the effort show. They want us to be constantly reminded that Holly is not quite what she wants to seem. The result is that we wonder why anyone sophisticated or savvy wouldn't see through this kid in five minutes. She's dining with captains of industry? This Holly is more likely to be serving them, all the while studying the clothes and manner of their mistresses with a desperate hunger.

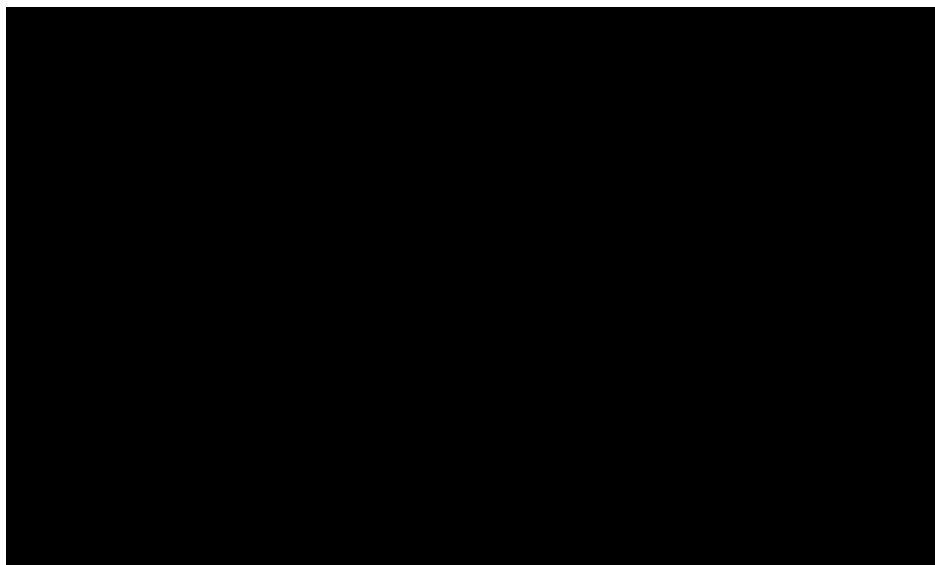
One of the few moments when Clarke gets to shine and we glimpse a fully rounded character is when she sits on her fire escape and strums a guitar. In the movie, of course, Hepburn sang "Moon River." But here as in the novella Holly sings a folk-country tune, a startling hint that we're about to discover where this kid came from. Clarke delivers it with ease and the song is transporting. For a brief scene, we are in the presence of a real person, one with a past and perhaps a future. Maybe *Breakfast At Tiffany's* was meant to sing after all.

VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE * 1/2 out of **** GOLDEN THEATRE**

Christopher Durang's new play is the funniest comedy on Broadway. That's not saying much since it's the *only* comedy on Broadway. But even if there were a lot more comedies on Broadway, it would still probably be the funniest. Pound for pound it's just as funny as the musical *The Book Of Mormon*... and tickets are probably a lot easier to get to *Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike*.

Nominally a tribute to Anton Chekhov, you don't need to know a thing about the Russian playwright in order to enjoy the show, though it does help to laugh knowingly at any reference to a cherry orchard, just to let your neighbors in the audience think you're sophisticated. In truth, anyone can identify with this story of two siblings who share a home in spinsterhood after years of caring for their aging parents. Vanya (David Hyde Pierce) is gay and lonely. Sonia (Kristine Nielsen) is frumpy and sad. Their glamorous movie star sister Masha (Sigourney Weaver) pays all the bills and swans in every once in a while to make sure they still feel appropriately inadequate over their lives and grateful for hers.

This time Masha is bringing along a boy toy named Spike (Billy Magnussen) amidst warnings from their truth-telling housekeeper Cassandra (Shalita Grant) that they better beware. Indeed! Masha doesn't just want to lord it over her siblings and attend a costume party at the former home of Dorothy Parker. She also wants to inform them that she's selling the house and they better start fending for themselves.



It's all stuff and nonsense brought to a boil by director Nicholas Martin, thanks to a cast that is good to great from top to bottom. Emily Rebholz has great fun with the costumes and it's hard to underestimate how important the work of lighting designer

Justin Townsend and the music and sound design by Mark Bennett are in punctuating jokes and scenes while taking us nimbly from light comedy to quiet moments of genuine pathos. If I weren't laughing so much, I might have paid better attention and be able to give specific examples. The set by David Korins is frankly a mess, with an ungainly attempt to show both the outside of the house and the inside of what I assume is a screened-in porch. It hardly matters.

Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike boasts the strongest ensemble on Broadway right now. Genevieve Angelson is just right in the small role of Nina, a would-be actress and passionate fan of Masha. Durang might easily have written a more obvious role, an Anne Baxter-like conniver or dippy fool. But instead he did the far more difficult task of writing a funny, young actress, naive and foolish but sincere without being silly.

Spike is all attention-grabbing and needy for admiration. He flirts with everyone in sight without compunction or shame. Subtlety is not called for and Magnussen wouldn't dream of it. Bounding around the stage like a puppy, taking off his clothes at the slightest excuse, his Spike is an amusing bit of eye candy. Here too Durang might have easily gone for a sleazier or stupider vibe but he and Magnussen create an endearing fool who doesn't mean harm even when he's breaking hearts.

Cassandra is surely the trickiest role, a voodoo-spouting housekeeper who keeps getting convulsed by spirits and intoning doom when she's not sticking needles in a doll. Grant has a blast with her, somehow making this yet another full-bodied character rather than the stereotype Cassandra might so easily become in lesser hands. Maybe it's her kewpie doll voice or offhandedly sexy nature, but Grant's Cassandra steals the show whenever she's onstage.

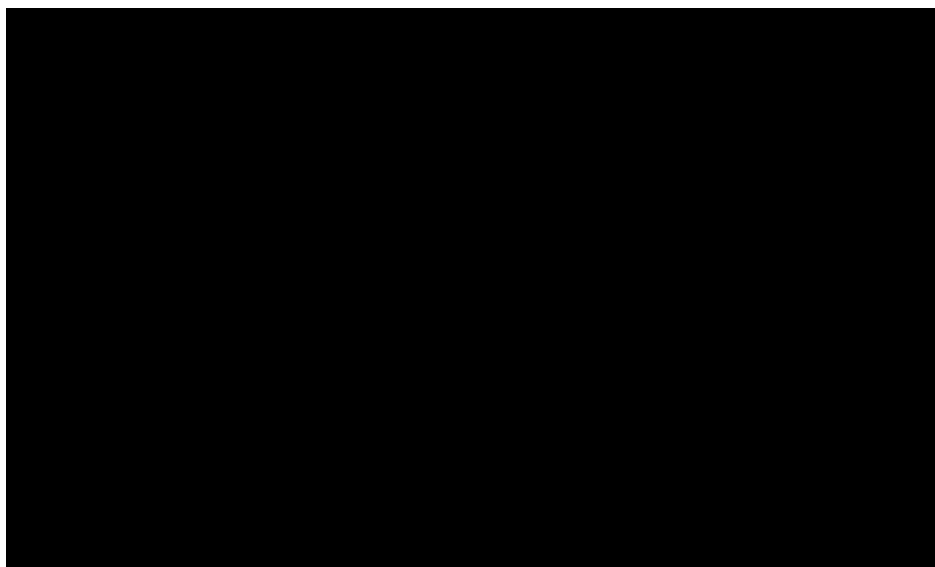
David Hyde Pierce has a show-stopping monologue in the second act but it's his subtle work throughout that keeps this engine running smoothly. His dry wit and perfect straight-man demeanor are great foils for the madness swirling around him. But it's Nielsen as Sonia who has the juiciest part of all. She does it all here: spouting off one-liners that are desperately funny, playing frumpy, glamming it up for the costume party where she sports a wickedly funny Maggie Smith impersonation and then quieting the house to hushed attention when this lonely sweetheart has a conversation with a man asking her out on a date. She's fated for at least a Tony nomination, as is the show itself.

Durang's real tribute to Chekhov is not a lot of sly references to Chekhov plays but the fact that he's tempered his usual lunacy. Here we get a genuine heartfelt story with real characters that ache and feel and become real to us. It easily ranks among his best. That's why my small caveat is for Sigourney Weaver. She's very funny as Masha and is as much a muse for Durang as anyone. You'll enjoy her performance as I did. But Weaver is all arch and knowing in her delivery, never digging below the surface of this silliness when all around her others are mining gold. She should be even better. This comedy deserves it.

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL'S TOTEM * out of **** SHEA STADIUM AKA CITI FIELD**

By now, audiences know you can be a fan of Cirque Du Soleil but still need the skinny on each show. They have so many productions around the globe that invariably some are lacking in imagination or too sexy perhaps for kids or simply in the wrong venue to make it wholly worth your while.

Happily, I can say that *Totems* is a return to the simple pleasures Cirque Du Soleil made their name with, that it's sexy but in a family-friendly manner and that the current venue is their best location in New York in many years. I saw their last show at Radio City Music Hall. That venue just doesn't suit them (or any circus) and *Zarkana* was a dark and confusing mess in terms of atmosphere. Madison Square Garden holds traditional circuses nicely (you can squeeze in a dozen elephants with room to spare) but it's too cavernous to enjoy the gentle pleasures of Cirque at its best. But in the parking lot of Shea Stadium (I mean, Citi Field), you get an intimate production of Cirque Du Soleil with the audience up close on three sides and the emphasis on juggling and clowning and acrobatics that delight.



This production is written and directed by Robert LePage and a Canadian and European sensibility dominates. Surely no American circus company would base a show around the evolution of man from amphibious creatures to humans, complete with appearances by a Charles Darwin studying and taking notes in nature and an amusing visual gag about man and apes evolving from a common ancestor. Creationists need not despair: Humans and creatures from all eras coexist and the emphasis is on entertainment, not science!

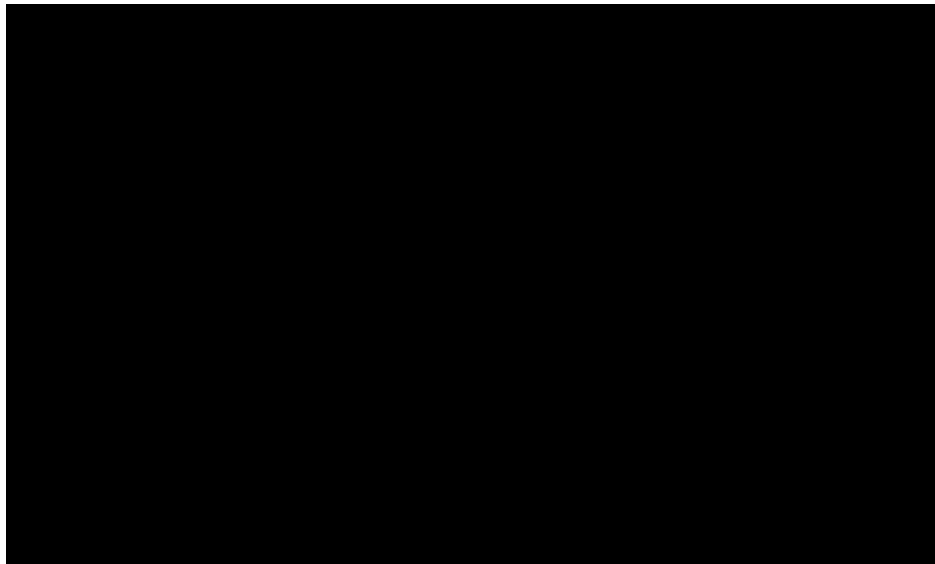
The Amerindian (their term) couple that romanced each other on roller skates somehow was kitsch I couldn't handle. The entire show is a mishmash (or should I say celebration?) of various cultures but roller skating Indians was a bridge too far. It didn't help that their would-be romance was more Harlequin than genuinely steamy. And the very challenging act of young women riding on unicycles and kicking bowls through the air and catching them on their heads was notable for its mistakes the night I saw it. Mistakes are good: They remind you how challenging their skills are and let the audience root for success. Still, I couldn't help thinking there was probably more drama when they got backstage.

But overall, the quality was high and the lags few. The clowning on a speedboat was a little rote but the clowning around fishing was an early delight. I loved the romantic flirting of a young couple on a trapeze and as with many acts, the eye candy was notably appealing for everyone in the audience both women and men.

The amphibious creatures came and went, cavorting about on a wooden structure that lent itself to simple but pleasing to look at gymnastics. Troupes came out and delivered acts like a team that featured men leaping from one springy board held aloft across the stage and landing on another narrow board. Invariably acts tried to build and build to a spectacular finish. But often it was the simplest, quietest moments that delighted the most, such as Darwin's bowl spinning where he sat on stage and sent bowls swirling off in all directions, each one charting an elliptical course before returning back to him, only to be shunted off in another direction until Darwin and his team had a constellation of bowls criss-crossing the stage. Elegant and simple and captivating, just like Cirque Du Soleil at its best.

THE LYING LESSON * 1/2 out of ****
LINDA GROSS THEATER FOR ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY

Craig Lucas has delivered an oddly flat and un-involving play about movie stars and fandom. Carol Kane is Bette Davis, trying to be incognito in a small coastal town in Maine in 1981. Minnie (Mickey Sumner) is the caretaker of the home Davis is about to close on. Minnie doesn't seem to have a clue who Bette Davis actually is (kids these days!) but it amuses the star, as long as Minnie can come to appreciate exactly how important Davis is and prove a suitable audience. That, truly, is about it.



Kane does not spring to mind when thinking of Davis but here she bears a strong physical resemblance and certainly captures the spirit of an aging movie star. All credit to the costumes of Ilona Somogyi, the lighting of Russell H. Champa and the hair and wigs of Charles LaPointe to make this so. The only problem is her voice, which retains the distinctive accent and mannerisms we associate with Kane. It's a constant reminder of the actress in the role. But once we accept Bette Davis as a character separate from rather than an imitation of the actual screen icon, it doesn't really matter.

The only real problem is the play, which has nothing to say. The most vivid lines in *The Lying Lesson* are little zingers about Joan Crawford that Lucas could deliver in his sleep. (Still, they're quite welcome.) Sumner has very little to do as the mildly duplicitous Minnie, an ardent fan who actually feigns ignorance of Davis to win her trust and then secretly starts taping their conversations. This goes precisely nowhere.

Whatever Lucas had in mind about stardom and fans and the essential skill of lying whether you're an actress or a fan or simply a human, it isn't developed to any degree here. Director Pam MacKinnon is left to simply guide the actors through their paces, let Kane have a little fun and get us out the door without too much fuss. For more inventive lying, we'll have to wait til next time.

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 ***
Bunnica: 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
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2

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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