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The Broadway Musicals of 1997 ** 1/2 out of **** Town Hall

The current season of Scott Siegel's catnip for theater fans series -- *Broadway By The Year* -- ended with a show focused on the big musicals of 1997. It wasn't a vintage year for great songs. But it did provide a peak moment for composer Frank Wildhorn, whose wildly devoted fans packed Town Hall to see the stars of *Jeekyll & Hyde* reunite on stage in New York for the first time in more than a decade.

The format is always the same. Current Broadway stars, veterans and rising talent come together to sing tunes

from various shows. If available, people from the original cast are naturally welcome. Ross Patterson is the musical director, Jeffrey Denman provides the choreography and performs and Siegel provides tidbits of information that make the audience sigh or giggle in memory of a bygone era. Invariably, you spot some new talent, remember a show fondly and find a new one whose cast album you want to check out.

The dominance of Wildhorn -- who had both *J&H* as well as *The Scarlet Pimpernel* on Broadway in 1997 -- was both the night's biggest draw and major drawback. His tunes remain relentlessly obvious and dull, despite the best efforts of the talent involved. Robert Cuccioli, Linda Eder and Christiane Noll clearly savored returning to the biggest hit of their careers -- Noll also directed the evening -- and brought an intensity to their various duets and solos ("This Is the Moment," "It's A Dangerous Game," "In His Eyes")

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that was a thrill for the fans but quite unrewarded by the songs themselves.

Better luck was had with *The Life*, the musical about drug addicts, pimps and prostitutes. Tony winners Chuck Cooper and Lillias White both dug into their show-stoppers with easy magnetism. "Don't Take Too Much" and "The Oldest Profession" aren't truly great songs but these two pros made them feel like it.

As good as they were, they didn't make me want to see a new staging of *The Life*. But that's exactly how I feel about *Titanic* and *Steel Pier*. I saw the under-appreciated *Titanic* in its original production and while the numbers done this night didn't exactly sell the show, they reminded me how special and somber an offering it was. *Steel Pier* was more of a crowd pleaser, thanks to Karen Ziemba reprising some of her great work on that Kander & Ebb show.

The vocal arrangement on "Satin Doll" (from a Johnny Mercer tribute called *Dream*) was fun, aided nicely by the hoofing, including an appealing Drew Humphrey. Poor Christina Bianco was saddled with one of Elton John's weakest pop hits, "Can You Feel The Love Tonight?" from the blockbuster *The Lion King*. It really shouldn't be performed, but if you must, a very light touch is called for. Bianco delivered it with intensity and drama, which made the tune all the more insufferable. She won the crowd back with a jokey "duet" with her inner Kristin Chenoweth on "Two Little Words," also from *Steel Pier*. I found it too shticky but the audience ate it up; if *Forbidden Broadway* were still around, she'd have a job.

The show ended with "The Circle Of Life," which if you've seen *The Book Of Mormon* can't help bring a snicker as you remember their mocking tune "I Am Africa." (Maybe that's why Lillias White sat out the finale yet took a curtain call.)

But the highpoint looked on paper like a gimmick. The musical *Sideshow* was about conjoined twins, played famously by Alice Ripley and Emily Skinner. Here the number was performed by Tyler Maynard of *Altar Boyz* and the very handsome David Burnham of the current Cy Coleman tribute *The Best Is Yet To Come* (which also includes Lillias White). Clever, I suppose, was my thought upon seeing the pairing for "Who Will Love Me As I Am?" But it wasn't a stunt. They turned the tune into a powerful duet that worked wonderfully, the sort of moment any Broadway show would kill for -- a great song delivered with passion by two fresh talents. Here are the two original Broadway stars performing the song on *Rosie*.

Maynard and Burnham were terrific, even though the dashing Burnham has never wondered in his entire life if someone would just love him as he is -- the answer has always been, of course. It's the sort of performance that keeps you coming back to the series. Up next in July is a **three-pack of shows by Siegel**, including his annual look at some of the best new talent from theatrical institutions around the country called *Broadway's Rising Stars*.

The Theater Season 2011-2012

*Broadway By The Year: 1997*** 1/2

*One Arm****

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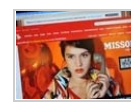
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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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