

Theater: 'Broadway By The Year' Hits New Peak; 'A Second Chance' Falls Flat

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BROADWAY BY THE YEAR 1940-1964 *** 1/2 out of ****

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THE TOWN HALL

Broadway By The Year has become an institution for the past 14 years, a celebration of Broadway's rich history by producer Scott Siegel that is the centerpiece of his many endeavors. It involves good old-fashioned Broadway belting, a generous showcase for new talent, cabaret acts and stars of the moment ready to deliver a classic tune or undiscovered gem on their night off.

Still, I was worried about this new season. Typically, each show focuses on one year (or maybe two from the very early days of Broadway). A core group of performers each come out and sing a song and then pair off in various groupings as well, with a little dance thrown in for good measure. You get some of the big hits of the year and invariably hear some little known tune that sticks with you for days to come or inspires the purchase of yet another cast album. But this season, each of the four shows would cover 25 years. Inevitably, it has turned this season into more of a greatest hits set. That plus the demands of finding so much talent to fill the stage had me thinking they might have diluted what made BBTY special.

Hardly. Siegel, along with director Scott Coulter and musical director Ross Patterson with his Little Big Band have stepped up to the challenge and delivered a stellar evening of entertainment. It can't hurt that I saw the evening covering 1940-1964, the golden age of the Broadway musical. But the final two nights of this series in May and June immediately become must-have tickets for anyone who still loves the Great White Way. If no one is filming and recording these evenings, they should be.

With 27 songs and proceeding chronologically, BBTY gave a fascinating overview of how Broadway changed year by year from the landmark musical Oklahoma to last gasps like Hello, Dolly. A few, a very few, performances left me cold. (Notably, the Broadway By The Year Chorus featuring talent from Siegel's showcase for stars of tomorrow was poorly rehearsed, messed up lyrics and generally looked out of their depth.) But that's inevitable in this sort of evening with dozens of artists on display. I can't even cover all the good acts because the list would get too long.

Natalie Douglas started things off swimmingly with a confident and sophisticated "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" from Pal Joey. As with every song, Siegel sets them up with some trivia and scene-setting details about the year and/or the show in question. Alexandra Sibling was one of a welcome handful to perform unplugged, in her case an operatic "If I Loved You" from Carousel. She was not only unplugged vocally but plugged into the style of performance from that day.

BBTY also shows how songs can be traditionally performed, made to seem modern or given a bluesy spin, to name just a few options. The default mode, however, is what I'd call Broadway Classic, good old-fashioned emoting in a style far removed from pop stylings or vocal stamina competitions where holding random notes as

long as possible seems to be the goal.

Two vets who were fondly welcomed back to deliver signature tunes were Liz Larson with "Ooh, My Feet" from her Tony-nominated turn in *The Most Happy Fella* and Anita Gillette with "Nightlife" from *All American*, which played at the Winter Garden (where Rocky is rope-a-doping while it prays the tourists start to come) way back in 1962, with a book by Mel Brooks. Both seemed as pleased to be onstage as the notably senior audience was to see them. (Truly, more younger Broadway goers need to wise up to BBTY.)

Amber Iman (who played Nina Simone in the recently shuttered musical *Soul Doctor*) was very impressive with "Come Rain Or Come Shine." And the fetching Brian Charles Rooney delivered a sweetly innocent "Maria" from *West Side Story*. (It would have been interesting to see how he fared in the Roundabout revival of the deeply cynical musical *The Threepenny Opera* in 2006.)

In the category of comic relief from men born to late for the Borscht Belt circuit, Jeffrey Schecter with "If I'm Not Near The Girl I Loved" and Jason Grae with "She Loves Me" were essentially tied in success. But they were both neatly trumped by Patrick Page, who had delicious vocal fun with "Captain Hook's Waltz."

Robert Cuccioli wasn't so lucky. He was an audience favorite (he always is), performing "Were Thine That Special Face" from *Kiss Me Kate*. The applause was warm but Cuccioli couldn't help but hear the roar of applause that greeted the end of William Michals singing "This Nearly Was Mine" from *South Pacific*. Michals performed the role of Emile de Becque in the terrific Broadway revival, a role encased on cheese by Mario Lanza. I wasn't thrilled with Paulo Szot who originated the role this time around, but found the other replacement David Pittsinger a huge improvement. Now I'm very sorry I didn't also get to see Michals tackle the part. Sans microphone, he delivered a version that was true to the song's operatic leanings but with a sensitivity to the lyrics and a feel for dynamics that was breath-taking. Like a pro, he managed to seem surprised by the audience's uproarious approval though he must have heard it night after night at Lincoln Center.

Another show stopper came in Act Two when Lisa Howard (a Drama Desk Award winner for *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*) tackled "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" from *The Sound Of Music*. I say tackled because it's such a beast of a song, the "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" of its day though covered far less often because most singers can't even begin to sing it effectively. But Howard was poised and elegant throughout, pacing the song beautifully and delivering it with a reserve that made the moment when she unleashed her voice completely all the more memorable.

But all of this pales compared to the fact that this edition of BBTY introduced me very belatedly to [the talent of Marilyn Maye](#). She was Johnny Carson's favorite singer (he called her the "super singer") and appeared on his *Tonight Show* some 77 times, more than any other singer. (Steve Allen loved her too.) She's won awards and been feted and appreciated by savvy theater goers and cabaret haunters for decades. Ella Fitzgerald once called [Marilyn Maye](#) the best white female singer in the world. But I was clueless until this 83 year old artist stepped on stage and killed it with "Guess Who I Saw Today?" from *New Faces Of 1952*. It was a master class in performing, in telling a story through song and keeping an audience rapt with attention. And her voice sounded terrific.

Siegel's no dummy. He brought her out again at the finale to sing a "bonus song," in this case "Before the Parade Passes By" from *Hello, Dolly!* To no surprise of those who'd heard Maye before, she was brilliant again. She's at Jazz At Lincoln Center in May, as well as Iowa and Missouri after that, so far. [Check out her website for dates](#), buy her CDs and thank me later. I'm thrilled she's doing shows uptown (Maye is one of the guests for Michael Feinstein's tribute to Cole Porter for Jazz at Lincoln Center). But it's not enough. She should be performing with a full orchestra a la Barbara Cook. She should have a Broadway show built around her a la Elaine Stritch and Lena Horne. She should be rushed into the studio to record a late career masterpiece a la Shirley Horn. Someone with money and influence make sure this treasure is given the best possible setting to

show her off. As Broadway By The Year demonstrates again and again, it all goes by so fast. Appreciate it while you can.

Here's a clip of Maye singing "Guess Who I Saw Today" from an earlier performance.

A SECOND CHANCE ** out of **** **PUBLIC THEATER**

Here's what's good about the chamber musical A Second Chance: stars Brian Sutherland and Diane Sutherland, who have bring intelligence and a searching openness to the roles of a recently widowed man and a divorcee who unexpectedly find themselves getting a second chance at love. They are both fine actors and have great chemistry. They better! After all, they're married. (That's a joke, of course. Some married couples for whatever reason do not work well together as performers. These two do.)

Here's what's not so good about the chamber musical A Second Chance: the songs. The essentially sung through two-hander by Ted Shen has long flowing melodies that resolutely refuse to offer up any memorable tune and lyrics that resolutely refuse to offer up much in the way of memorable words. It is directed sensitively by Jonathan Butterell down to solid technical elements down to a fine ensemble overseen by Zak Snyder with orchestrations by Bruce Coughlin. But the best efforts of all involved cannot cover over the fact that A Second Chance has nothing new to say and no especially vivid way to rehash old truisms.

Dan is a widower still sunk in pain and sadness (it's been less than a year since his beloved wife died). Jenna is a kooky free spirit of sorts (the sort of character I instinctively dislike but which Diane Sutherland made appealing for me). She's over a bitter divorce and ready for love; he's miserable and needs something to buck him up but feels guilty about even thinking of dating again.

They meet at a party, go to the safe space of a museum to see if they're compatible and slowly, gingerly approach romance, despite his trepidation, an apartment filled with "ghosts" and the subtle disapproval of his friends who think he's moving too fast or dishonoring his wife's memory by finding someone else so soon.

That's it, really, down to dates where they get involved in discussions of such mundane materials as their opinions of the TV series Mad Men, which is about when I checked my watch on this slim offering. Sung in simple, declarative sentences with no hint of a "song," it's the hazy sort of pseudo-sophisticated music that people associate with high art and Stephen Sondheim, though Sondheim of course delivers shows chock full of catchy tunes.

Still, this might have served as a vehicle for some thoughtful displays of an intelligence at work if the story itself wasn't so tepid. Certainly a person recently widowed would feel a little funny about diving into a new relationship (or the object of their affection might reasonably worry about this person being on the rebound from grief). But would Jenna really feel so threatened by the fact that a man whose wife is barely cold in the ground still has pictures of her up in his home? Jenna seems far too sensitive and understanding for such a blinkered reaction. You expect her to empathize and say, hey, she'll always be a part of your life. Instead, she seems frustrated and about ready to insist he toss every memento of his former life into the bin.

The problem here is reflected in the title: this isn't a second chance at love for Dan. That implies he blew his first chance. It's another chance at love, one that can respect and treasure the past without seeing any future happiness as a betrayal of his dead wife. Dan and Jenna don't seem to understand even that simple distinction, which makes their awkwardness frustrating since neither states the obvious. Even at the end, they haven't reached the point we arrived at about two minutes after the beginning.

THEATER OF 2014

Beautiful: The Carole King Musical ***