

Theater: Broadway's Golden Age; Seeing Double At 'Twelfth Night'

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BROADWAY BY THE YEAR 1941-1965 *** out of ****

TWELFTH NIGHT (OR, WHAT YOU WILL) *** out of ****

WHAT YOU WILL (OR, TWELFTH NIGHT) *** 1/2 out of ****

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THE TOWN HALL

I just saw Monday March 30th's edition of the ongoing series Broadway By The Year and I'm already penciling in (make that inking in) the next two nights, [which take place on Monday May 11 and Monday June 22](#). Where else can you see two dozen legends, hot stars and rising talent for about \$50? I'm not a big cabaret goer and this show -- which mixes Broadway talent with cabaret stars -- reminds me of what I'm missing. And the next edition includes names like Patrick Page and the brilliant Bobby Steggert, among many others. It's always crowded but [if you jump you can get tickets](#). I only wish there were more young theatergoers in the audience: it's the most enjoyable musical theater history lesson in town.

The conceit is simple: each night of Broadway By The Year focuses on 25 years of Broadway, tackling at least one song from a show that premiered each year. Sometimes it's a world famous standard, other times a little known gem or just a silly throw-away that's fun to do. You get to hear how musicals developed, catch some great rising talent and enjoy some favorites given fresh life. It's the linchpin of producer, creator and host Scott Siegel's empire of musical theater events both at Town Hall and throughout the city.

The night proper kicked off very promisingly with Beth Leavel growling and kicking and having a blast on "Blues In The Night." I remembered it was written for the movies, but only hardcore theater buffs probably knew the song was so popular it was highlighted later in a Broadway revue called Priorities Of 1942. That's the sort of trivia Siegel sprinkles throughout in his brisk introductions. He'll offer up a nugget and then end with, "...and that show was My Fair Lady," which invariably sends a ripple of pleasure through the audience. Happily, he now only calls for an encore bow when the applause demands it; the tight intros and no fake second bows keep the evening at an enjoyable 150 minutes.

Every edition has its own character and this one was dominated by comedy. John Bolton emphasized the worldwide popularity of Oklahoma by singing the title song in German and Japanese. [Julia Murney](#) and [Ben Davis](#) (who was great on Broadway in Violet) each did solo numbers but they really shone on "There Once Was A Man" from The Pajama Game, with Murney showing off her comic chops. [Rising cabaret star Molly Pope](#) was a pistol doing an unplugged version of "Too Darn Hot" from Cole Porter's Kiss Me, Kate. She's one of the talents you spot during these revues like this and make a point of going to see them in their own shows, soon.

The last time we saw [Jeremy Morse](#), he was preparing to tackle How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying. Here the appealing Morse returned with a razor sharp take on "I Believe In You" that makes you sorry you missed him. His only failing seems to be that he's a Phillies fan. (Though it could have been worse; he could have been a Boston fan.) And again, someone should do a musical about Mickey Rooney and Morse should star in it. Or at least a revival of Babes In Arms. Steve Rosen was also fun in the goofy "Don Jose (Of Far

Rockway)." It really was a silly evening, all in all.

Her comic timing was exquisite and [KT Sullivan](#) looked ready to step right back into a revival of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which she delighted in almost exactly 20 years ago to the day on Broadway. That sense of theater history coming alive is one of the pleasures of the show, with Sullivan reprising one of her big career moments, linking today back to her revival in 1995 back to the original *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* starring Carol Channing way, way back in 1949. Channing also came alive via Lee Roy Reams, who was in one revival of *Hello, Dolly!* and directed Channing in her last (of many) revivals of that show, coincidentally also in 1995. Reams knows the show inside out and his palpable pleasure at putting over a medley of tunes from it was a nostalgia fest in and of itself.

He was proof that hitting all the notes perfectly isn't how artistry happens, though of course knowing how to use the voice you're working with on any given night is key to a good performance and career longevity. [Lari White](#) had a rough night on "You'll Never Walk Alone" from *Carousel*. Hey, it ain't easy, and stumbles for various reasons (health, not enough time to rehearse amidst a busy schedule, a changing voice) are inevitable in a show like this done for love not money by all the performers. Only fools think auto-tuned and dull perfection on TV shows like *Glee* are the standard to expect.

And it doesn't always matter. The handsome leading man [Ryan Silverman](#) (who has an old school Broadway voice and starred recently in *Side Show*) charmed in a duet from *West Side Story* then held the stage and filled the hall with ease on the show's finale "On A Clear Day You Can See Forever." He just missed that last big note (and the one before let you knew it wouldn't be easy) but that didn't detract at all from his warm presence and complete command of the song and the audience.

Still, the moments of perfection shine all the brighter. [Jenna Dallacco](#) is one of the talents handpicked by Siegel during his annual "stars of tomorrow" showcases. The best often perform as the *Broadway By The Year* chorus, which had the curtain raiser tonight with "We Did It Before," a good example of an interesting number keyed to WW II that you'd never hear anyone perform these days but was fun to check out. Many go on to careers in theater and cabaret and here was Dallacco returning for her solo debut at Town Hall and this event. She did "Small World" from *Gypsy* with conviction and ease. You'd easily confuse her control and song-first approach to the material with [the great Liz Callaway](#). That star delivered a delicate, moving version of "Look To The Rainbow" from *Finian's Rainbow* that was a master class in serving the song. It's one of those moments that makes *Broadway By The Year* worth returning to again and again.

Here's [Molly Pope at 54 Below](#) singing "But The World Goes 'Round."

TWELFTH NIGHT (OR, WHAT YOU WILL) *** out of ****

WHAT YOU WILL (OR, TWELFTH NIGHT) *** 1/2 out of ****

BOTH AT DOROTHY STRELSIN THEATER

Hey, if Shakespeare couldn't make up his mind what to call this romance, why should [Bedlam Theatre](#) decide how to perform it? In a clever decision, Bedlam is offering up two spins on the same tale, both performed by the same cast on succeeding days. Some actors play the same roles in radically different styles; others play different roles from one night to the next. Mind you, in these trim, playful adaptations (both running two hours or less), pretty much everyone seems to be playing everyone else if only for a moment or two. Shakespeare is famed for his cross-dressing heroines and characters donning disguises; Bedlam doubles down on that with glee.

Have you heard of Bedlam? If you're a theater-goer in New York City, almost assuredly. They're the theater company du jour and deservedly so. I missed their break-through production of *Hamlet* alongside *Saint Joan* but they've continued that run and that approach. They're a company of actors tackling two classics at once in repertory: last time it was a delightful *Sense & Sensibility* along with a solid *Seagull*; today it's *Twelfth Night*

and...Twelfth Night.

I was under the impression that the two productions would contrast more dramatically, with one lighter and one darker. Not so; both are essentially larks, though unquestionably there are differences to be noted. Some things, however, remain constant. The five member cast is excellent. The direction by Eric Tucker (who also performs) is sharp and rewarding. The laughs are plentiful.

Great fun can be had by attending both versions; indeed, a repertory company revels in having actors tackle different roles in succeeding shows so watching them tackle the same role differently is a rare pleasure. I'd recommend a few days or at most a week between performances (though I saw them on consecutive days quite happily.) Nonetheless, Twelfth Night is solid but What You Will is the more assured and effective version.

You can bring along your own edition of the First Folio to try and follow along, but it's not necessary. Both versions tell the tale of identical twin siblings, a brother and a sister separated at sea in a disastrous shipwreck. Both Sebastian and Viola -- as alike as two peas in a pod -- imagine the other is dead. Viola, as Shakespeare's romantic heroines are wont to do, dons male attire and becomes the much appreciated aide to Duke Orsino. He is wooing -- or attempting to woo -- the lovely Olivia. (Even Viola and Olivia are playfully similar names, aren't they?) Viola as his manservant is sent to woo in the count's stead and Olivia finds herself passionately drawn to this comely youth. (Indeed, the Duke Orsino must admit he's unreasonably attached to the lad as well.) Meanwhile, Olivia's drunken uncle Toby Belch and his friends pull increasingly cruel pranks on the priggish steward Malvolio. When Sebastian shows up, everyone is thoroughly discombobulated until true love finds its mark.

Shakespeare always has fun with gender bending, but Bedlam takes it to a new level here. Women are playing men who play women who play men. Men play women who play men who play women. Everyone falls in love with everyone and it's all tremendous fun. Sometimes too much fun. Tucker's What You Will is the better version because it feels more focused on character. The Twelfth Night version is wackier and the hi-jinks sometimes seem to take place for their own sake. It savors the nuttiness of actors switching roles to a fault, with one high point featuring the actors tossing around hats and other props as they madly switch from one role to another. Toss in some puppetry and other devices and you've got a free-for-all. It's energetic and fun but not as emotionally rewarding and no more laugh-inducing than the other.

Tucker's meta-concept for Twelfth Night is less rewarding than the more focused work on What You Will. Here, everything from the setting (which begins and ends under a plastic tarp evoking the sea) to the character switches feel of a piece. The cast is clothed in creamy white and beige colors (courtesy of costume designer Valérie Thérèse Bart) that evoke a certain aristocratic privilege without tying the story down to a particular time period. Color runs riot and while I'm not sure why the blood red paint became increasingly prominent (this is not a bloody play) it felt purposeful and I went with it.

The music is strong throughout. Excellent Americana-style tunes performed by the cast filled Twelfth Night while recordings of classics by Billie Holiday and others proved very effective in What You Will.

I was crazy about Tucker and especially [Andrus Nichols](#) in Sense & Sensibility (she played the lead there); [it was one of my favorite shows of 2014](#). They both shine again here, with Tucker a marvel at drawing laughs out of a snort or askance look as he exits the stage. It puts me in mind of Mark Rylance and there is no higher praise than that, especially for an actor/director/company leader like Tucker. Susannah Millonzi was also very strong in the dual roles of the dimwitted suitor Sir Andrew Aguecheek and a deadpan take on Olivia's gentlewoman Maria.

But this time I fell hard for the talents of Edmund Lewis and [Tom O'Keefe](#). Lewis of course played many roles, but his most notable work was as two very different and very satisfying takes on Malvolio. The butt of jokes in Shakespeare's plays are not often characters I find very interesting. But Malvolio has a storied history among

great actors. Ian Holm reportedly tackled him many times, and others who assayed it include Simon Russell Beale, Patrick Stewart, Derek Jacobi and Stephen Fry in the glorious edition that played on Broadway in 2013/14. Heady company indeed.

Lewis proved why the part is so tempting, despite its secondary status; he found depths of feeling and complexity in this stock villain, along with the humor that is so natural to it. I really have a problem with Shakespeare here. Malvolio's sins (essentially, telling the drunken Belch and the rest to stop making a racket at one in the morning) are very modest while the genuine cruelty they engender is way out of proportion. I was hoping this production would cut or minimize that cruelty. It didn't, nor did it solve the problem of this imbalance. But the staging in *What You Will* was excellent -- the torture was evoked perfectly simply by having one actor twirl a light bulb on a long cord to light the scene on an otherwise darkened stage. And Lewis made the discomfort real enough to satisfyingly unsettle the final, otherwise romantic finale.

O'Keefe was equally appealing and charming while tackling the jester Feste and the long-lost brother Sebastian (and Sebastian's sister and Cesario and more -- it's that kind of double bill). His singing and playing of tunes in *Twelfth Night* (he did the musical composition along with Ted Lewis) was very winning. And his Feste was a marvel. The *Twelfth Night* version of Feste was winningly sly and sexy, to the point where one wondered why Olivia didn't fall for him. The *What You Will* Feste was childlike without ever condescending. And his Sebastian was soulful, somehow letting you believe he fell immediately in love and would indeed get married at the drop of a hat. As with all the actors involved, I can't wait to see him again.

On a bare bones budget, the cast and technical team deliver satisfying entertainment. The *Twelfth Night* take revels in those frantic, all-aboard changes of characters with actors swapping parts almost mid-sentence. The *What You Will* version is highlighted by showing one actor play two characters at the same time, such as when O'Keefe had Feste accosting Sebastian to great effect. Both are worth your time.

Bedlam clearly deserves arts funding and its own space and a long-running hit (how I yearn to see their *Sense & Sensibility* again) and a long, long life. Rylance had his *Globe*. Anyone up for providing them their signature space?

THEATER OF 2015

[Honeymoon In Vegas](#) **

[The Woodsman](#) ***

[Constellations](#) ** 1/2

[Taylor Mac's A 24 Decade History Of Popular Music 1930s-1950s](#) ** 1/2

[Let The Right One In](#) **

Da no rating

[A Month In The Country](#) ** 1/2

[Parade in Concert at Lincoln Center](#) ** 1/2

[Hamilton at the Public](#) ***

[The World Of Extreme Happiness](#) ** 1/2

[Broadway By The Year 1915-1940](#) **

[Verite](#) * 1/2

[Fabulous!](#) *

[The Mystery Of Love & Sex](#) **

[An Octoroon at Polonsky Shakespeare Center](#) *** 1/2

[Fish In The Dark](#) *

[The Audience](#) ***

[Josephine And I](#) ***

[Posterity](#) * 1/2