

## Theater: 'Bunnacula' Sings; 'Mnemonist' Forgettable

Posted: 02/14/2013 2:08 pm

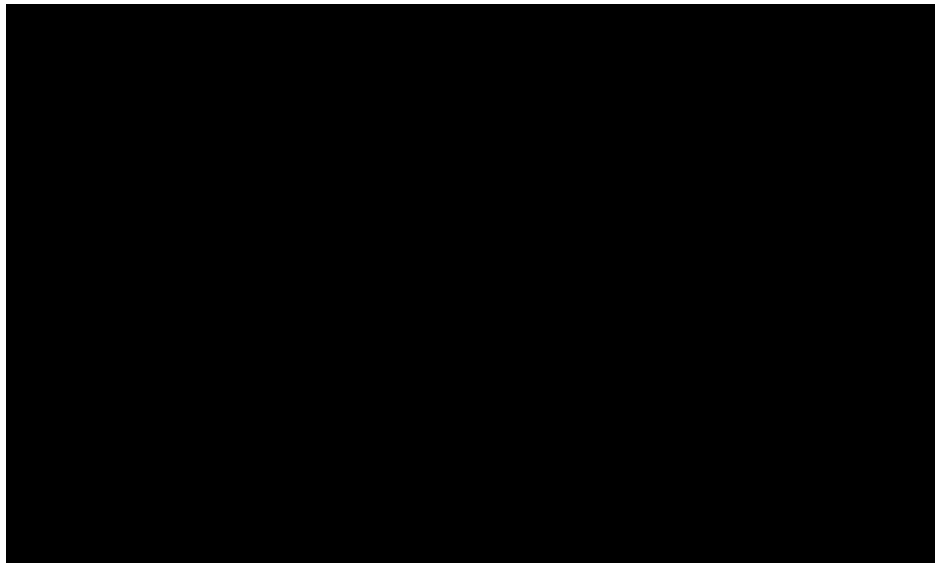
**BUNNICULA: A RABBIT TALE OF MUSICAL MYSTERY** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**THE MNEMONIST OF DUTCHESS COUNTY** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**BUNNICULA: A RABBIT TALE OF MUSICAL MYSTERY** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**DR2 THEATRE**

I don't know if the children's book *Bunnacula* has ever convinced a kid it was scary and cool to eat their vegetables. But James Howe's silly 1979 story about a bunny rabbit discovered at a rundown movie house that might just be a vampire has been a perennial favorite for decades, offering up goofy fun and a quiet message about feeling displaced when a new family member arrives.

It's been adapted for the stage many times but this musical adaption geared towards kids at New York City's DR2 Theatre has some heavyweights behind this 65 minute diversion. Charles Busch wrote the book and Mark Waldrop of *When Pigs Fly* wrote the lyrics, with Sam Davis contributing music. While the show is diverting for tykes and pain-free for parents, given the status of Howe's novel and the people involved, this has to rank as a modest disappointment.

For those who don't know the story, the Monroe family is a happy household, with even their dog Harold (Robert Anthony Jones) and their cat Chester (Prescott Seymour) getting along famously. That changes when the family comes home from seeing a revival of *Dracula*, where they found a bunny rabbit in a box and a note that seems to be written in Carpathian. Soon, the vegetables in the fridge are being drained dry. Chester puts two and two together and gets eleven as he frantically decides that the bunny -- now named Bunnacula -- is in fact a vampire and that the family is in mortal danger.



Chester convinces Harold to help him unmask Bunnacula, but when scheme after scheme fails Chester decides to literally kill the bunny -- though since this involves placing a steak on the bunny rather than actual real violence, parents needn't be too concerned. Being jealous of a new member of the family is the real-world undercurrent of the novel and musical. But Howe and Busch leave the door wide open since Bunnacula may indeed be a Transylvanian vampire after all.

The show is essentially faithful to the tone and plot of the book with a few modest changes. The two brothers in the story are changed to a boy and a girl. And the finale is amped up to increase the drama. The songs start off promisingly enough: "Bunnacula" sets the right goofy tone and "My Best Friend" is a good showcase for Harold and Chester. But it soon runs out of steam, with the songs becoming less and less distinctive as the plot tries to juice up the action.

The weight of the story rests on Chester and Harold, who like the songs become less memorable as the show goes on. *Bunnacula* the novel led to a string of sequels and still sells well. If this harmless musical enjoys a long life, it will strictly be due to the warm feelings for Howe's original work.

**THE MNEMONIST OF DUTCHESS COUNTY** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**THE ATTIC THEATER COMPANY AT BECKETT THEATER**

When a play doesn't work, it leaves everyone else confused and at a loss. The scenic design by Julia Noulin-Merat doesn't convince. The performances by the cast are fuzzy and indistinct. The direction by Laura Savia may mislead and misdirect. But it all comes back to the writing of Josh Koenigsberg. How can you blame them for not making sense of something that doesn't ever work in the first place?

*The Mnemonist of Dutchess County* at the Beckett Theater on Theater Row in Manhattan probably intends to tell the story of a socially awkward young man named Milo (Henry Vick). Milo is plagued by a cognitive quirk -- a remarkable memory that literally won't let him forget a single thing. Milo is a college campus security guard and he works with a psychiatrist/teacher to develop coping skills. Slowly, Milo becomes a little more confident and socially adept (touring with a stage show that makes use of his freakish ability helps) and even gets to be romantic with the local bar owner Gina (Ava Eisenson).

That's the idea, at least. Clearly inspired by a real-life case and probably the writings of Oliver Sacks, the show never turns the idea of an overwhelming memory into a viable story. One brief moment in which Milo describes how he "sees" numbers hints at what might have been but even that is dramatically ruined. Milo confesses to Gina that his favorite number is 107 because he pictures it as being Gina in a purple dress on a beach at sunset. It's an unintentional romantic ploy that works but it's spoiled a bit since instead of being the final heartmelting admission, it's only the second in a string of images he describes, rather spoiling the climax when Gina leans in for a kiss about four numbers too late.

But even the basics of the story are unclear. Is Milo mentally challenged? At times, he seems to have the emotional maturity of a 12 year old, at best. When cornered he freaks out a bit a la Rain Man and even seems a little dangerous. But at other times he seems like an average guy with this weird ability to remember stuff. Since Milo seems in constant need of adult supervision, it's fine that he feels sweet on the worldly Gina but a little creepy when she hits on him. He doesn't seem quite capable most of the time of committing to a real relationship and since she's literally just sleeping with him at first, it's impossible to know exactly why she's doing it. Milo hasn't been cast as a handsome devil that could charm people into overlooking his oddity or not realize how immature emotionally he might be. So why exactly does Gina want a fling with him one drunken night? The idea that she might actually want to date him is -- in context -- hard to swallow.

Similarly, the play seemed to be hinting that as Milo became more socially adept, his memory skills might start to fade. When he was doing his stage shows -- which include tricks like rattling off numbers of the cards in a shuffled deck -- Milo stumbled again and again. Ultimately, it seemed to be the actor that was stumbling over the memory tricks, not Milo. (Why not just have someone in the balcony with flash cards so he can get the order right?) Forgetting your lines in this play in particular is unfortunate and confusing.

So many stories are dropped or muddled it's hard to know where to begin. The play starts with Milo's best friend Joey (Malcolm Madera) insisting the doc help his pal out. It's the only significant relationship in Milo's life but Joey disappears for more than half the play. Similarly, Dr. Hulie (Brit Whittle) seems like a dreadful psychiatrist, though that too doesn't seem to be the intent of the play. His assistant Samantha (Jessica Varley) makes the key diagnosis, devises a way to test and help Milo and so on. All he does is unburden himself on Milo and try to cash in with a book and lectures that mock his patient. Samantha, on the other hand, may or may not have tried to commit suicide after being caught cheating via Milo's extraordinary memory. The play is too murky for me to be certain what was intended.

Aaron Costa Ganis takes the thankless part of a lower class white guy who talks street and ultimately imparts a little energy into the show as he hosts Milo's memory lecture tour. But his antics feel more like asides, even though his character Tito is dating Gina and seems to supplant Joey in Milo's life.

One brief moment hints at what might have been in a show that genuinely tackled the problems of such a memory. Dr. Hulie in one of his many dreadful moments, attacks Milo for not showing enough pain over the death of Milo's mother and not visiting her while she was dying. (I remembered Milo making a quite natural reference to his mother dying of pancreatic cancer but didn't remember any particular revelation that Milo was unfeeling.) It's a paper tiger but Milo's response is still intriguing: he says his mother urged him not to visit her while she was dying. She knew he would remember every word, every smell, every sound of her painful last days and didn't want the eternal memory of her rotting away in a hospital to haunt him for the rest of his life. So a memory like his might not just be fodder for a parlor trick but a haunting burden. A better play would have explored this.

#### **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

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.

Follow Michael Giltz on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/michaelgiltz](http://www.twitter.com/michaelgiltz)