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CATCH ME IF YOU CAN *** 1/2 out of ****
NEIL SIMON THEATRE

It's tempting to say "a star is born." But that already happened with actor Aaron Tveit's electrifying turn in the Pulitzer Prize-winning show *Next To Normal*. So let's just say a star is confirmed with Tveit's winningly confident and charming performance as the young con artist Frank Abagnale Jr. in *Catch Me If You Can*. He sings and dances and oozes sex appeal with ease; most of all, Tveit simply *belongs* on stage under the spotlight. Like a pilot who strides onto a plane in uniform, Tveit inspires confidence in an audience. He comes out and starts talking and you immediately relax: it's going to be

a fun ride.

It helps when a star is surrounded by an excellent cast from top to bottom and a creative team that is perfectly in sync with the material. *Catch Me If You Can* is a sheer delight from the poignant and brilliant book by Terrence McNally to the sexy but character-driven choreography by Jerry Mitchell to the perfect sets by David Rockwell to the spot-on costumes by William Ivey Long to Kenneth Posner's marvelous lighting. It's all tied together by the superlative direction of Jack O'Brien which is seamless in weaving together drama, comedy, dance, acting, genuine scenes of pathos and casual banter with the audience and orchestra. Here's the creative team in rehearsals:

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The lone exception to this litany of praise is the strong score by Marc Shaiman, which is not matched by the merely serviceable songs by Shaiman and co-lyricist Scott Wittman. It's a step down from their work on *Hairspray*. The songs aren't bad and sometimes prove quite effective. But they're the one element that keeps this from being an instant classic.

Maybe you've seen the film by Steven Spielberg? It contains one of Leonardo DiCaprio's best performances as a kid, really, who starts writing bad checks and soon begins conning his way into a life of ease and pleasure. He fakes being an airline pilot, a doctor (!), a lawyer and soon has left a trail of cons amounting to almost \$2 million that has FBI agent Carl Hanratty (the great Norbert Leo Butz) hot on his trail like a schlubby Inspector Javert. When Frank falls in love with a girl (Kerry Butler), he's ready to settle down and have a real life. But is that even possible any more and would he know how?

The smartest decision they made was to begin the show with Frank's arrest at a Miami airport, where he demands to make a statement. When Hanratty responds that Frank isn't going to put on a show for God's sake, of course that's exactly what he does. It's a TV special in a way, which allows for all sorts of smart touches and just the right sort of glitzy superficiality to let the story of his cons go down easy.

The orchestra is onstage on a riser, with stairways leading down, allowing for all sorts of razzle dazzle like you might have seen on *The Andy Williams Show* way back when. Suddenly, Tveit is free to address the audience, introduce characters like his folks and his girl even when they're not going to appear in the real story until much later and even get interrupted by Hanratty with some pestering questions. This one conceit -- Frank's story told as if it were a TV special -- works like a charm. It informs everything that comes after it and makes this complex, time-shifting tale flow by effortlessly.

And the production numbers bring it home. When I heard a sample of four songs sent to theater fans to encourage ticket sales, I was worried. But those same songs delivered with pizzazz by a huge cast and with great choreography and sets deliver a genuine jolt of pleasure to the audience again and again. "Live In Living Color" sets things off perfectly, right down to the chorus line high kicking it. The female chorus gets to have more fun than the guys since they're constantly in sexy costumes and even get to solo during numbers with Tveit, whether it's as stewardesses in "Jet Set" or nurses in "Doctor's Orders."

Time and again, the sets are just right. A scene in the FBI offices contains just two subtly under-sized desks and some depressing office lighting stretching off into the back. That's it -- just a slanted impression that the office goes on and on. Why are the desks undersized? (You might not even notice it.) To emphasize their dull lives compared to Frank's? I don't know why, but it immediately delivers the information you need (where the scene is set) and the emotional state of the people in it with no muss or fuss. The same is true of multiple bar scenes, Frank at home as a kid, the airport lounge and on and on -- when a scene needs more, it gets more; when less is more, that's what they deliver.

Butz is the perfect partner for Tveit. He gives gravity and weight to a character that might have just been a comic foil. It's hard to top Tveit but when Butz gets to knock it out of the park with "Don't Break The



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Rules," the audience is cheering him on as the underdog he is compared to our dazzling con man. This is a show so confident in its story that it ends the first act on a quiet note as Butz's Hanratty realizes that the guy he is tracking down is just a kid. Thanks to the gravity Butz brings to the role (never missing the humor or fun, either), that moment delivers.

Almost everyone else is ideal as well. Tom Wopat plays Frank's ne'er do well dad with ease, a guy who makes us like him and then distrust him and then feel pity for him. His two big numbers -- "Butter Outta Cream" with his son and "Little Boy, Be A Man" -- are two of the show's best. Just look through the cast credits for the rest who deliver. They all do with the exception of Butler. She's good in the acting moments. But her big number is one of the weakest -- "Fly, Fly Away" -- and unlike the rest (whose moments in the spotlight are played at just the right level of intensity), Butler is so determined to turn her song into a showstopper that she pummels it into the ground, complete with Bette Midler-like arm-movements (as if she's gonna literally fly away) and an unfortunate attempt to get soulful. She's much better on the quiet moments of the song, when the sweetness she exuded in *Xanadu* comes through again.

These are minor complaints in a show that is clearly this generation's answer to *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying*, right down to the references to Pan Am and this show's homage to that one by having the hero turn to the audience and smile mischievously when he's about to pull another con. The hero in *How To Succeed* is a bit of a cipher. But the hero in *Catch Me If You Can* is a young guy with a messed-up but loving dad who is just doing what he's been taught: maintain eye contact, keep talking and never tell the truth when a lie is so much easier. That show may have the better songs but this one has heart, something that few light-hearted romps like this ever even attempt.

At the center of it all is Tveit, who doesn't need to con anyone about anything. Yes, he maintains eye contact and keeps talking and tells us stories all night long. But we sure get our money's worth.

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Elling **

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The Hallway Trilogy: Paraffin ***

The Hallway Trilogy: Rose ***

How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying ***

The Importance Of Being Earnest ** 1/2

The Interminable Suicide Of Gregory Church *** 1/2

John Gabriel Borkman * 1/2

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

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