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Theater: "Chaplin the Musical" Lacks Color; Goodbye FringeFest

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CHAPLIN THE MUSICAL * 1/2 out of ****
SALAMANDER STARTS OVER *** out of ****
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CHAPLIN THE MUSICAL * 1/2 out of ****
ETHEL BARRYMORE THEATRE

Walking into *Chaplin The Musical*, I thought to myself, well, if they end or god forbid even bracket the show with Charlie Chaplin's appearance on the Academy Awards after years of self-imposed exile, it's probably not going to be good. As the finale approached and they rolled out the red carpet and announced it was 1972 (the

year Chaplin appeared on the Oscars to a standing ovation), sadly my prediction proved correct. This dutiful bio-musical is like *Mack & Mabel* without any good songs, like a Chaplin film but without most of the gags, like too many other shows where they chart a great man's life from childhood to early obstacles to triumph, crisis and final vindication with all the excitement of an A&E Biography. In many respects, it is made with care and craft. But a musical with a dull book and an invisible score, a musical without a purpose simply can't work. A great score will excuse many flaws; a poor one will obscure a lot of hard work.

But let's begin with what works and nothing works harder than star Rob McClure. It's not quite the triumph that Robert Downey Jr accomplished in the leaden biopic *Chaplin*. I can't say McClure became a star. But he certainly showed off a great deal of old school pizzazz and mastered the Tramp's shambling walk. McClure dances on tables, walks a high wire, roller skates, sings and makes fun of Hitler, so what's not to like? It's all in an emotional vacuum unlike say Hugh Jackman's triumph in the awful musical *The Boy From Oz*, where he somehow managed to let everyone forget the by-the-numbers show he was appearing in. Still, it is a strong performance and it will be interesting to see if and how he succeeds in something actually good.

The story begins with Charlie's hardscrabble childhood featuring a drunken father and a mother who fell ill and lost her music hall job, her mind and her son. Like all artists, Charlie is rather self-obsessed so we see their painful parting but don't even find out he has a brother till years later. That's Sydney, played with a modest voice and a genuine warmth that marks Wayne Alan Wilcox as another talent that should

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outshine this show.

Charlie leaves Sydney and his hospitalized mother far behind, taking a gamble on the moving pictures. You won't be surprised that he succeeds. In the show's single best scenes, we see Charlie overwhelmed by working on a motion picture, develop the Little Tramp and film a short that makes the Tramp a star.

In the show's dogged attempt to chart every step of Chaplin's progress, a little boy comes out and announces Chaplin's latest hit... and then comes out a little later and announces another hit...and then comes out again later and announces yet another hit. So he's a hit; we get it.

The framing device of the show is not thankfully the Academy Awards but is sort of the conceit that we are watching the filming of Chaplin's life. Unfortunately, that is dropped soon, though it was a good idea. Still, throughout some clever touches can be found. At many points, the stage is filled with the flashes and crackles of an old movie, as if we're watching a ragged print of a classic film, complete with pops and scratches. It's done quite subtly and nicely, along with the sound of a projector humming along that often makes an appearance.

The costumes by Amy Clark and Martin Pakledinaz are built around a black and white palette for most of the show, a tricky challenge they meet nicely, as my guest David pointed out. (The splash of color at the finale was appreciated intellectually but didn't have quite the pow it should have emotionally.) Similarly, the wig and hair design by Paul Huntley ages McClure subtly throughout. The set design by Beowulf Boritt (great name!) and video projection design by Jon Driscoll work nicely at certain key moments, such as the reenactments of filming those classic shorts (a set piece that is over too soon) and Chaplin's first experience watching a movie.

But there's a curious, circus-like theme that keeps reappearing. Plus virtually all of the songs (by Christopher Curtis, who teamed with Thomas Meehan on the book) are interchangeable and forgettable. That leaves little for director and choreographer Warren Carlyle to do. Big numbers appear and have literally no purpose. Why does act one end with a bunch of Tramp impersonators? To remind us that Chaplin was world famous? We know. To tell us even in a crowd of Tramps he's still alone? Yikes. None of this is really hinted at in the number. It's just a spectacle with the Tramps dancing around the stage and bits of business tossed out and then it's over.

Act Two should have more of a drive to it since it actually features some conflict. Gossip columnist Hedda Hopper is so annoyed that Chaplin won't give her an interview that she decides to drag him down, dogging the entertainer with accusations of communism (he makes her job easier by repeatedly addressing communist rallies) and hedonism (all those young brides and lovers) until it finally sticks. In the show, Chaplin is driven out of the US in shame. In real life, it's a little more accurate to say he stormed off, annoyed that anyone would question the great artist. Besides, exile overseas when you have millions and live like a king is hardly the sort of trying experience most people can identify with. Jenn Colella is good as Hopper and makes the most of her big number. Unfortunately, she is singing a song that echoes lines that have been used repeatedly throughout the show. She sells it but we've already heard it. Michael McCormick is good as producer Mack Sennett and numerous other parts, but they're all gone too soon.

I can't blame the director for throwing the kitchen sink at this story and filling up the stage whenever possible with all sorts of diving and hoops and pratfalls. I can't blame the cast that gave their all, especially McClure. Sure, Chaplin had an exciting life but that alone doesn't mean you've got a compelling reason to tell his story. What about him excites you? What about his life intrigues you? Why *his* particular story and in what particular way are you going to tell it to make it come to life? In the second act, Chaplin says he refuses to make another movie until he's had a great idea. The people behind *Chaplin* should have done the same. Sure, he's world famous even now. But if they had an idea (however misguided) about how to tell his life story in a unique and meaningful way, I have no idea what it was. I don't think they do either.

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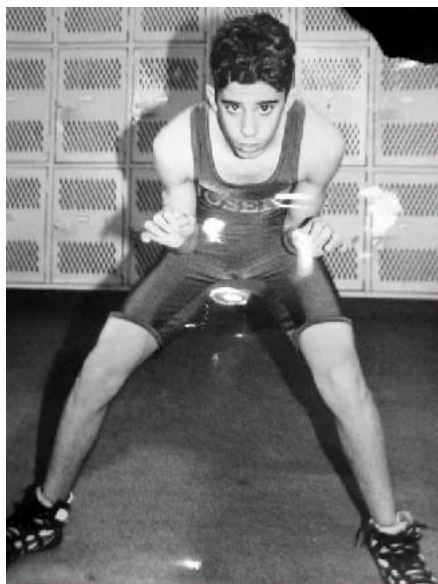
[INDEPENDENTS](#) *** 1/2 out of ****

[SOHO PLAYHOUSE](#)

It's time to say goodbye to the 2012 New York International Fringe Festival. You've still got a few more chances to catch some of the most popular shows of the fest at the [Fringe Encores series](#). I used it as an excuse to check out the musical [Independents](#) for the second time. You can read [my rave review after seeing it the first time right here](#). A second look only reinforced what I believe: this is a show filled with talent on stage and behind the scenes and I'll be keeping an eye out for them in the future. I don't think I praised enough the anchoring performance of Jacob Roa as Liam, the hero of the piece that all the other characters revolve around. He has that gift of likability; the moment he appears you want to root for him. The show is squeezed into the Soho Playhouse, so much of the excellent direction by Charlie Polinger is lost here. People are on top of each other on stage and have to troop up and down the aisles repeatedly. But you shouldn't miss this one. I just wish I could buy the score.

As for other shows, I was very happy I got a chance to catch the solo piece [Salamander Starts Over](#), which was written and performed by Armando Merlo and directed and developed by Leigh Ann Pedra. It's a sweet and simple story. The particulars are new but you've heard it before.

Armando relates how he grew up in a rough neighborhood with a dad who didn't seem to "get" him and a funny, loving, but perceptive mother who always knew how to steer her boy onto the right path. Well, almost always. When Armando trips on acid and falls asleep in the gutter and gets arrested, his parents decide an all-boys Catholic school is just the ticket. Armando hates it and then loves it, falling somehow into wrestling which proves his ticket to self-confidence, dedication to hard work and a chance at his dream college NYU. He stays in touch with the old gang even as he grows up and drifts away. Armando even sort of realizes his dad isn't so bad and maybe just maybe his folks had some good advice every once in a while.



Like I said, you've heard it all before. But this is Armando's story and he tells it with passion and love (and without trying to puff it up into something it's not). It's modest and engaging and sweet and a solid showcase for a very appealing performer. Armando doesn't disappear into every character but he does deftly paint a portrait of all his chums, his gruff dad, his hilarious mom, right down to the pizzeria owner who gave Armando a free slice every day. I'm not certain if Armando will be writing plays for other actors now that he has this out of his system or whether he'll use this as a calling card to get work in other shows. But I do believe he's not starting over as such -- he's just beginning.

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Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***
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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 **
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Harrison, TX ***
Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck" (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Pink Milk (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Who Murdered Love (FringeNYC) no stars
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#MormonInChief (FringeNYC) **
An Interrogation Primer (FringeNYC) ***
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Sheherizade (FringeNYC) **
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Independents (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
The Dick and The Rose (FringeNYC) **
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Bombsheltered (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
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Rated M For Murder (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
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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

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.

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05:44 AM on 09/16/2012

I didn't have high hopes for Chaplin -- it just didn't FEEL like it'd be a hit. Hard to explain, but after a long lifetime of theater-watching, you just get a feeling about a show before you even see or hear it. Once a season, you might be surprised. But usually, a musical throws off definite vibes weeks before I settle into my seat.

A pity in this case, because it's the product of an awful lot of talent, money, and imagination. As happens all too often though, it was expended in the service of a bland, forgettable score.

I like that there are people out there still trying to create old-school musicals. But the key element of this type of show -- memorable, distinctive show tunes -- is a lost art. Today's composers, even the talented ones, simply don't know how to write great show tunes anymore. You might as well ask a contractor to build a Gothic cathedral -- it can't be done, not for lack of money or will, but simply because the craft has died out.

Even well-reviewed hit shows I've seen recently and liked haven't succeeded primarily because the score was first-rate. In fact, I can't recall the last time I've seen a new musical that had what I'd call a great score, the 21st-century equivalent of Rodgers, Gershwin, or Arlen. For Chaplin, I'd have settled for the 21st-century equivalent of Lionel Bart!

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz

freelance writer

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02:06 AM on 09/20/2012

Thanks for commenting. I always keep an open mind and would love nothing more than to be surprised and delighted by a show I held out little hope for. But it's true Chaplin seemed doubtful and failed to overcome those fears. It's true the best musicals of recent years have had strong music but not the catchable pop songs of yesteryear. I'll defend Once and Spring Awakening but as evocative and strong as the music is, it's not exactly Cole Porter and Anything Goes. Maybe Hairspray or parts of The Book Of Mormon?

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