



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

Theater: Charmer "The Band's Visit" An End Of The Year Treat

12/08/2016 10:00 pm ET

THE BAND'S VISIT *** 1/2 out of ****

ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY

One of the best films of 2007 has become one of the best musicals of 2016. You probably haven't heard of the movie it's based on: *The Band's Visit* was an Israeli film that enjoyed a lot of critical acclaim (including mine) and worldwide success. But because half of its dialogue was in English, it wasn't accepted for Oscar consideration and lost the most useful platform in the US for bringing attention to movies from around the world. Written and directed by Eran Colirin, it focuses on the modest but grandly named Alexandria Ceremonial Police Orchestra, which is traveling from Egypt to Israel to perform at the opening of a cultural center. But a little booking mistake strands them in a tiny Israeli town in the middle of nowhere. They're forced to camp out in various homes overnight where tensions arise (it's the Middle East, after all), friendships are formed and a little romance blossoms. It's a gentle and sweet story about the essential humanity of us all and who couldn't enjoy hearing about that right about now? It's also funny and just plain delightful, the sort of gem that brings a smile to your face.

Now it has been turned into a musical and the transition is so seamless and perfect you'd swear the film was a musical to begin with. David Yazbek created the music and lyrics and it's surely the best work from a man who recently did the hapless *Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown*, but previously worked on *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (a big hit) and *The Full Monty* (ditto, which also has in common with *The Band's Visit* a generous attitude towards people). The book is by Itamar Moses, who accomplished similar magic with the musical *The Fortress Of Solitude*. And the director is David Cromer, the genius behind such terrific shows as *Tribes*, a brilliant *Our Town*, *Adding Machine* and many more. It's a triumph for all involved.

Indeed, this is one of those shows where everyone is so in tune with each other that the show simply unfolds in front of you. You don't think "What a great set!" (by Scott Pask, and who knew the Atlantic could accommodate a roundtable?) or "What perfect costumes that avoid mugging but are fun anyway?" (by Sarah Laux) or what great accents (Mouna R'miki was the language and dialect coach) or what great lighting and sound and orchestration (Tyler Micoleau and Clive Goodwin and Jamshied Sharifi). You're too busy enjoying

yourself.



(l-r) Katrina Lenk and Tony Shalhoub in Atlantic Theater Company's world premiere musical *The Band's Visit*, directed by David Cromer, featuring a book by Itamar Moses and original score by David Yazbek. Opening December 8, 2016 at The Linda Gross Theater (336 West 20 Street). Photo: Ahron R. Foster.

It begins with a group of men in fancy, powder blue uniforms, ready to buy their tickets for an important trip. Tony Shalhoub is Tewfiq, the officious leader who takes his role as conductor very seriously indeed. An Egyptian cultural center that's not even located in Jerusalem is probably not that big a deal in the scheme of things, but you know it's a journey they've been anticipating for a long time. Shalhoub sends the band's Lothario (Ari'el Stachel as Haled) to buy the tickets. But Haled is too busy flirting with the ticket seller and next thing you know they are lost in a poor excuse for a town with no hotel and no way out until the next day. The no-nonsense but awfully attractive and self-confident owner of a cafe named Dina (Katrina Lenk) takes pity, finds them all lodgings and we're off.

This may be an isolated backwater that even the locals put down with regularity, but it's a notably lovelorn one. John Cariani is Itzik, an unemployed schlub whose wife is tired of his endless adolescence. (He's got the short pants to prove it, seeming more like a gangly kid than a new father.) Daniel David Stewart plays Papi, an awkward kid who freezes up whenever a girl gets near. Dina is so appealing — and yet single — that you know there has to be some story there, too. There's even a guy (Erik Liberman) who simply stands by the one pay phone in town, night after night, waiting for his girl to call. We don't know why she left or why he still dreams she might ever reach out again, but we have the sad-sack feeling his vigil is pointless. It's that sort of

town.

And music is flowing around all these people and all these stories. The orchestra members naturally carry their instruments to whatever home they're bedding down in, then people talk and the musicians begin to play. Like many shows, *The Band's Visit* uses a cast that in part can pull off playing those instruments with aplomb. Other nominal members of the orchestra are always in the background somewhere, so singing out your troubles seems as natural as breathing.

The show casts an intimate spell akin to the musical *Once*. Unlike that deserved Tony winner, *The Band's Visit* doesn't boast the intense and immediate rush of the stirring pop tunes featured in that movie turned musical. The songs here are more shaggy, more human, though everything from "Welcome To Nowhere" to "Beat Of Your Heart" (about falling in love) and the hilarious "Papi Hears The Ocean" stand out musically. Also unlike *Once*, the songs are not belted out by people who suddenly sound like major recording artists. These are real songs sung by real people. Even the actors who have better voices hold back and allow themselves to sound sweet and genuine, sometimes singing in awkward keys or given melodies that rise just a little out of their range when they're most plaintive. The result is a musical with a charm and vulnerability you never get in more typical shows when someone is belting out an anthem about feeling left out yet soaring to the heavens with a gorgeous voice. It's a truly original and refreshing approach on every level, the perfect marriage of sensibility with story.

It's also a real ensemble, though Shalhoub and Lenk obviously hold our attention throughout. Lenk gives a charismatic, knowing turn as Dina, a woman who is tough but not so hardened to life that she can't see Tewfiq as a person worth reaching out to when she has the chance. Shalhoub charms, of course, and the more his character — a widower — tries to hide in his shell, the more we yearn to see him break out. I don't know what his TV and movie commitments are, but he needs to clear his schedule for the next year, so *The Band's Visit* can play right where it is or transfer to Broadway. If it happens soon, Ben Platt of *Dear Evan Hansen* and Andy Karl of *Groundhog Day* just got some worthy competition. But who cares about Tonys? A show like this is its own sweet reward and I can't wait to see it again.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise ***

Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2

Something Rotten ***

Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

Broadway & The Bard * 1/2

Prodigal Son **

A Bronx Tale: The Musical **

Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **

Nice Fish ***

Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***

Hughie **

Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2

Straight ** 1/2

Eclipsed ***

Red Speedo ***

The Royale ** 1/2

Boy ****

The Robber Bridegroom ***

Hold On To Me, Darling ***

Blackbird ** 1/2

Disaster! *

The Effect ** 1/2

Dry Powder ** 1/2

Head Of Passes ** 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2

The Crucible (w Ben Whishaw) ***

Bright Star **

She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***

Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***

RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2

Nathan The Wise ** 1/2

The Father **

American Psycho **

Waitress ** 1/2

Fully Committed ** 1/2

Long Day's Journey Into Night ***

A Streetcar Named Desire (w Gillian Anderson) ***

Tuck Everlasting **

War **

Paramour * 1/2

Troilus & Cressida (Shakespeare in the Park) ** 1/2

Cats (on Broadway, 2016 revival) **

The Encounter (Complicite on Broadway) **

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (at Two River Theater) ***

Oh, Hello ** 1/2

Heisenberg ** 1/2

The Dudleys ** 1/2

Holiday Inn * 1/2

A Life ** 1/2

Love Love Love ** 1/2

The Radicalization Of Rolfe (FringeFest NYC) ** 1/2

Sweat * 1/2

The Death of The Last Black Man In The Whole Entire World aka The Negro Book Of The Dead ***

Falsettos **

Dead Poets Society ** 1/2

Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812 *** (but ** 1/2 if you've seen it before)

Sweet Charity (w Sutton Foster) **

Mouse: The Persistence Of An Unlikely Thought *** 1/2

Dear Evan Hansen ***

The Illusionists: Turn Of The Century **

The Bodyguard **

The Wolves ***

The Band's Visit *** 1/2

REGISTER TO VOTE!!

It's easy, it's fun, it's empowering.

Here's a nonpartisan site that will allow you to easily access your state's voter registration site.

Are you in New York? You can register online right here.

If you don't register and vote, you don't get to complain.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the founder and CEO of the forthcoming website BookFilter, a book lover's best friend. Trying to decide what to read next? Head to BookFilter! Need a smart and easy gift? Head to BookFilter? Wondering what new titles came out this week in your favorite categories, like cookbooks and mystery and more? Head to BookFilter! It's a website that lets you browse for books online the way you do in a physical bookstore, provides comprehensive info on new releases every week in every category and offers passionate personal recommendations every step of the way. It's like a fall book preview or holiday gift guide — but every week in every category. He's also 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.

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.