

Theater: Cool Cole, Lively Joyce and Lots of Talented Teens

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THE AMBASSADOR REVUE ** 1/2 out of ****
TOWN HALL

DUBLINERS: A QUARTER *** out of ****
THE GREENE SPACE AT WYNC/WQXR

THE NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL THEATER AWARDS *** 1/2 out of ****
MINSKOFF THEATRE

When you think about all the special events, the one-night-only or extremely limited run showcases and concerts that take place, it's amazing how smoothly most of them run. And while the three events I'm talking about already happened, you can experience them or the people involved for a long time to come.

Cole Porter's The Ambassador Revue was a one-night only event at Town Hall, one of my favorite spaces in the city. It marked the North American premiere of the revue Porter created to smash success in Paris back in 1928. It was overshadowed by his Broadway breakthrough later that year (with a show called Paris, appropriately enough) and the revue and most of its songs faded from memory. Rightly so, since songs like "In A Moorish Garden" and "Hans" and the like are not among Porter's absolute best. But they were fun to hear for an evening, presented with elan by a game cast including Anita Gillette and Jason Graae, who was most in tune with the era and delivered the most successful renditions throughout the evening. Wisely, the show also included brief tributes to Gershwin and Porter that allowed them to perform some genuine classics as well. The dancing led by choreographer Randy Skinner was a real crowd-pleaser. And any evening spent with [Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks Orchestra](#) is an evening well spent.

Unfortunately, the evening was plagued by poor audio, especially by the singers (the orchestra itself was well-miked). This made many of the songs literally difficult to hear, especially the twisty lyrics Porter is famed for. Since the evening was a revue, it will remain a mystery to me why the director Ken Bloom didn't just stop the show and have it fixed. No one would have minded in the least. Indeed, the entire affair was a casual to a charming degree, with the singers sitting on stage at tables drinking and chatting while others performed. A large plant was almost knocked over, Burton fiddled with the body mike that kept getting loose on Graae, Gillette wandered forward to sing then suddenly whirled around and headed back to her seat, stage whispering, "This isn't my song!" And it was all perfectly enjoyable. But poor sound? Not so much. It turned what might have been a real charmer of an evening into a mildly frustrating one.

But never fear! [Vince Giordano is always in residence at the Iguana](#), so anyone coming to the city should be sure to check them out. Here's a glimpse of the band in performance.

[Dubliners: A Quartet](#) wasn't so much a theatrical experience as a recording session the audience present at the Greene Space was invited to attend. We watched a troupe of excellent actors perform four short stories by James Joyce in their entirety, with audio effects and musical performances turning them from simple recordings into audio plays. They tackled "Araby," "Eveline," and "Clay," broke for dinner and wined up with "The Dead." Obviously, all four come from Joyce's Dubliners, one of the greatest if not the greatest short story collections

ever written. Here's a brief video talking about the project.

Now playwright Arthur Yorinks (who also directed with Jim Simpson) makes clear in notes to the evening that he believes these four audio plays should be experienced as one full play. Indeed, the works in *Dubliners* are interconnected in ways large and small that resonate powerfully. But including a half hour dinner break the evening ran some four hours. Plus, as my guest suggested, musical performances that begin and end each story feel like gilding the lily (as opposed to the songs that arise naturally during the tale). Joyce is so musical already that you don't need music. (As perhaps the attempt to create the Broadway musical *James Joyce's The Dead* proved.)

The good news is you can decide for yourself. This month, they will be making a podcast and streaming video on demand available of the entire evening. If you're like me, you might choose to listen to one story at a time. That will make the music that bookends each tale feel more like the frame around the tale rather than integral to it and not get in the way of the story. Or you can do as Yorinks suggests and tackle them all at once. You can't go wrong, especially not with a cast that includes among others Sean McNall of Pearl Theater Company, the great Dana Ivey (who managed the good trick of singing a song for humor but without betraying her character), Peter Gerety, Sean Gormley and the always spot-on John Keating, who never fails to find truth and humor in every part no matter how small. Ultimately, [Dubliners: A Quartet](#) is sure to prove a worthy addition to the original works that have sprung from the Greene Space and WNYC/WQXR. [You can check their website](#) to find out when it becomes available and about future productions they're making happen.

Finally, I attended the [National High School Musical Theater Awards aka The Jimmy](#) out of a sense of duty. Let's support arts in the schools and who knows, maybe spot some future talent. I was a little surprised they were charging admission (though of course it went towards the worthy work of [NHSMTA](#)). I would have thought you'd have to beg people in New York City to attend. Plenty of family and friends and some industry folk were present, including industry pros serving as judges including Scott Ellis, Kent Gash, Rachel Hoffman, Arielle Tepper Madover, Tara Rubin, and Nick Scandalios. Maybe a little part of me worried about how long it might drag on.

So the last thing I expected was a smooth, well directed and well performed evening of entertainment where the singing and performance was of genuinely strong quality. It's a real tribute to director Van Kaplan, choreographer Kiesha Lalama and music director and arranger Michael Moricz how strong this event proved. The teens showed up just a few days early and in that time they all mastered opening and closing numbers and medleys in which chunks of them performed selections from their own songs while doing backup singing and dancing for the others in their group.

A lot of care was placed into how the songs segued from one to another (often to amusing or contrasting effect) and how to showcase for example two Jean Valjeans and three Shreks, when multiple actors had won awards for the same characters. Each performer also worked on their solo number, even though only six of them got to perform that in the second half of the evening.

Previous winner [Ryan McCartan](#) (of *Heathers The Musical*) was a genial, Bill Murray-ish host, proof of the success winners have had. (And not just winners: a finalist from last year was plucked out of obscurity to play the lead in the West End revival of *Miss Saigon*.) I've seen many shows on Broadway and Off where I wondered why certain people who simply don't have the pipes were cast. It always seems unforgivable to me with so many actors clamoring for work and this group of teens was further proof. A few were vocally weak but most were quite strong.

And the spirit of teamwork was palpable: the members of each medley's chorus were given little bits to do segueing in and out of their performance that was always in service of the group. You never felt anyone was trying to hog the spotlight or take away from anyone else. The judges watched rehearsals of the medley (and solo performances, I assume) so they had a lot more info to pull from when picking finalists. My guest was

especially impressed by Emma Magbanua, even though she did a number from Miss Saigon (a show neither of us likes in the least). I was certain Jillian Cailloutte, even though she did a number from A Little Princess (a musical I've never heard of). Neither made the cut but only one of the six that did raised an eyebrow for us. And the two winners were worthy, including Jai' Len Josey and especially Jonah Rawitz, who impressed with his versatility. I'll be saving this Playbill because I'm certain these two and many others showcased have a future in the theater and I want to say I saw them first. And kudos to the behind the scenes talent that crafted such a strong evening out of their youthful energy and enthusiasm. Here are videos of Josey and Rawitz in performance (not from this event but before) and one of Rawitz's original songs posted on YouTube.

THEATER OF 2014

[Beautiful: The Carole King Musical](#) ***

[Rodney King](#) ***

[Hard Times](#) ** 1/2

[Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead](#) **

[I Could Say More](#) *

[The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner](#) **

[Machinal](#) ***

[Outside Mullingar](#) ***

[A Man's A Man](#) * 1/2

[The Tribute Artist](#) ** 1/2

[Transport](#) **

[Prince Igor at the Met](#) **

[The Bridges Of Madison County](#) ** 1/2

[Kung Fu \(at Signature\)](#) **

[Stage Kiss](#) ***

[Satchmo At The Waldorf](#) ***

[Antony and Cleopatra at the Public](#) **

[All The Way](#) ** 1/2

[The Open House \(Will Eno at Signature\)](#) ** 1/2

[Wozzeck \(at Met w Deborah Voigt and Thomas Hampson and Simon O'Neill\)](#)

[Hand To God](#) ***

[Tales From Red Vienna](#) **

[Appropriate \(at Signature\)](#) *

[Rocky](#) * 1/2

[Aladdin](#) ***

[Mothers And Sons](#) **

[Les Miserables](#) *** 1/2

[Breathing Time](#) * 1/2

[Cirque Du Soleil's Amaluna](#) * 1/2

[Heathers The Musical](#) * 1/2

[Red Velvet, at St. Ann's Warehouse](#) ***

[Broadway By The Year 1940-1964](#) *** 1/2

[A Second Chance](#) **

[Guys And Dolls](#) *** 1/2

[If/Then](#) * 1/2

[The Threepenny Opera](#) * 1/2

[A Raisin In The Sun](#) *** 1/2

[The Heir Apparent](#) *** 1/2