

Theater: Cotton Club Reborn, Bawdy Burlesque, Magic Acts Refined

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AFTER MIDNIGHT *** out of ****
LA SOIREE *** out of ****
NOTHING TO HIDE ** 1/2 out of ****

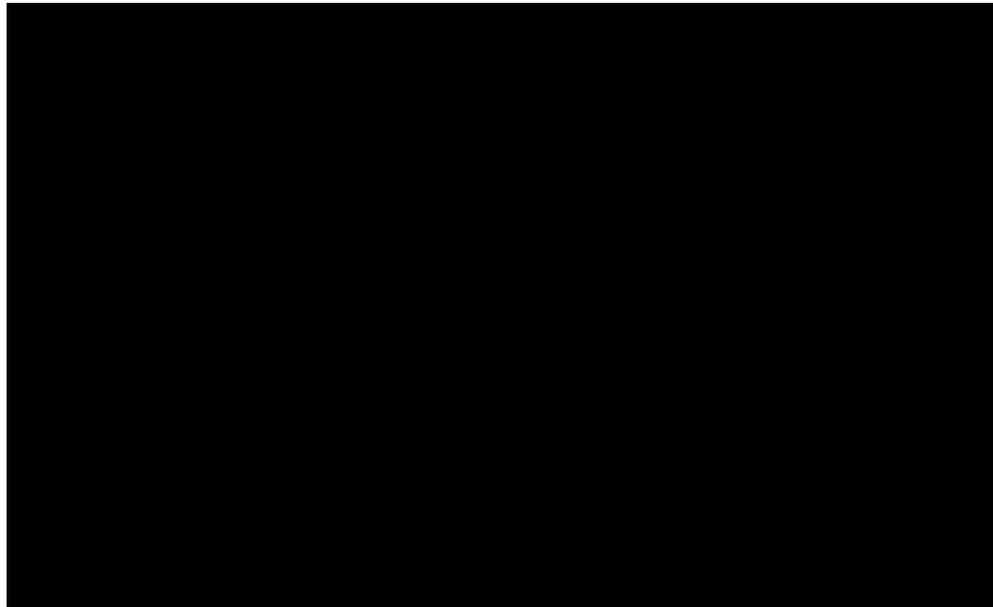
AFTER MIDNIGHT *** out of ****
BROOKS ATKINSON THEATRE

The most amazing fact about *After Midnight* is that it took so long for someone to revive the spirit of the Cotton Club. Ever since the dazzling but maligned film by Francis Ford Coppola, I've read up on and been fascinated by that famed venue. Of course, you wouldn't want to revive the actual Cotton Club: it embraced the ethos of a Southern plantation down to the decoration of the nightclub and its "no blacks allowed" policy. Yes, the brightest talents of Harlem performed at the Cotton Club. They just couldn't be served there.

After several years of special engagements, *After Midnight* has opened on Broadway and it's exactly what you would expect and hope: a glittering revue filled with singing and dancing and beautiful, decorative women in fancy costumes (though not enough of them), all overseen by a genial host and highlighted by a special guest star (right now it's Fantasia). To top it off, you have the swinging-est orchestra pit around, thanks to the Jazz at Lincoln Center All-Stars.

It's classy, it's fun, it lasts a very satisfying 90 minutes with no annoying intermission to stretch it out and I hope it runs for years (and that I get to come back and see kd lang in the spring). It's a pity union rules keep the show from performing actually at midnight: it would be fun to see how raucous and tie-loosening a Broadway house might be watching this show if it started at 10 pm and they had a dinner and some drinks under their belts.

It also can and should be much better. Given its revue nature, there's no reason it won't improve in the months to come if they have the money and the desire.



First, the highlights. Fantasia is a great special guest to launch the series. As much as I'm aching to see kd lang backed by that big band, Fantasia was a treat, providing genuine star power and glamour to the evening. What impressed most was her maturity and reserve. She knew to save the fireworks for the big moments. She

performed four numbers in all, with "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" a great opener that left you panting for more. Then came a terrific "Stormy Weather" followed by a playful, lesser Cab Calloway call-and-response number "Zaz Zuh Zaz." Fantasia ended with a mild "On The Sunny Side Of The Street," which lacked punch and is a poor choice for her. At the very least, I'd give "Stormy Weather" the choice, penultimate slot as her last big number; it's iconic and she does a great job. Let "Sunny Side" be second or better yet, sub it out for another song that gives Fantasia more to play with. God knows this band could probably play any classic tune sight unseen, so why not?

Adriane Lenox had a blast playing the world-weary blues singer. She was hilarious and show-stopping on both "Women Be Wise" and "Go Back Where You Stayed Last Night." The only problem was that she didn't have any more spotlighted numbers. The audience is waiting for her so much, at least a third number is called for.

Carmen Ruby Floyd looked a little bored, frankly, during the trio, Andrews Sisters-like "Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea." But she more than made up for it on the Duke Ellington classic "Creole Love Call." She turned this evocative, wordless song into a masterclass of comic subtlety. Similarly, Everett Bradley had star power to spare as he led a quarter on the playful "Diga Diga Doo" and generally shone whenever he was onstage (or cat-calling from the box seats on the side).

The dancers were also generally fun, with Julius Chisholm and Virgil Gadson having great fun on a duet of one-upmanship. Their embrace of modern style along with classic moves let us know early on this wasn't a museum piece, even if most of the highlights were unquestionably a blast from the past. Gadson also showed off a sexy side on "East St. Louis Toodle-oo," a fun romp with the female hoofers. Jared Grimes topped them off with his ferocious and rhythmic tapping.

Now, onto the critiques. I enjoy the talented Dule Hill from *The West Wing* and *Psych*. He's a handsome, talented actor. As a dancer, he's not bad... for an actor. As a singer, he's not good. Surely, one song for him ("I've Got The World On A String" with balloons amusingly included) was more than enough. More crucially, he's the scene-setter for our night on the town. Hill recites passages by Langston Hughes. It may partially be due to the selections, but they can and should range from sexy to funny to insightful to moving. For all I know, they do. But Hill delivers one and all in the same smooth, monochrome voice so each passage leaves absolutely no impression at all.

The lighting by Howell Binkley at the beginning certainly doesn't help. They end the show well enough. But at the beginning, you expect some dazzle and it's not forthcoming. I'm not sure if the orchestra (which is onstage throughout) was ever lit up in glory the way they deserve and should have been at least as an intro. The very modest scenic design by John Lee Beatty underwhelms as well. Except for some chintzy signs paying tribute to the Savoy Ballroom, The Cotton Club and other venues that are displayed very briefly, it's fairly invisible except for some bigger numbers, like the finale. The costumes by Isabel Toledo and hair design by Charles G. LaPointe take up a lot of the slack, adding considerable pizzazz to the evening. But really, you expect a wow moment at the beginning, some serious fanfare for the orchestra and something a little more impressive for the nod to the actual Cotton Club than what's on display. The sound design by Peter Hylenski is exemplary.

And for a 90 minute show, they draw upon handful of lesser tunes. Why? And why have hoofers sing so much if that's not their strong suit? They should either be triple threats who can belt it out or stick to the dancing. "Happy As The Day is Long" has weak singing, as do both numbers assayed by the superior dancer Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards. And with such a rich catalog, you might expect one or two offbeat numbers but "The Skronch" and "Peckin" and "Ain't It De Truth" and "The Mooche" and the better forgotten "Freeze and Melt" as the finale? One could speak up for any one of them and some are done well (especially "Peckin") but the combined effect is to drag the show down. The flat dance number "The Mooche" should simply be cut entirely.

And with all that, let me make clear again what great fun *After Midnight* is right now. I enjoyed seeing Hill do a split (full credit for that impressive move) and Fantasia was a very special guest who's having a ball (it looks like she'll be giving her many fans the happy ending they want for her).

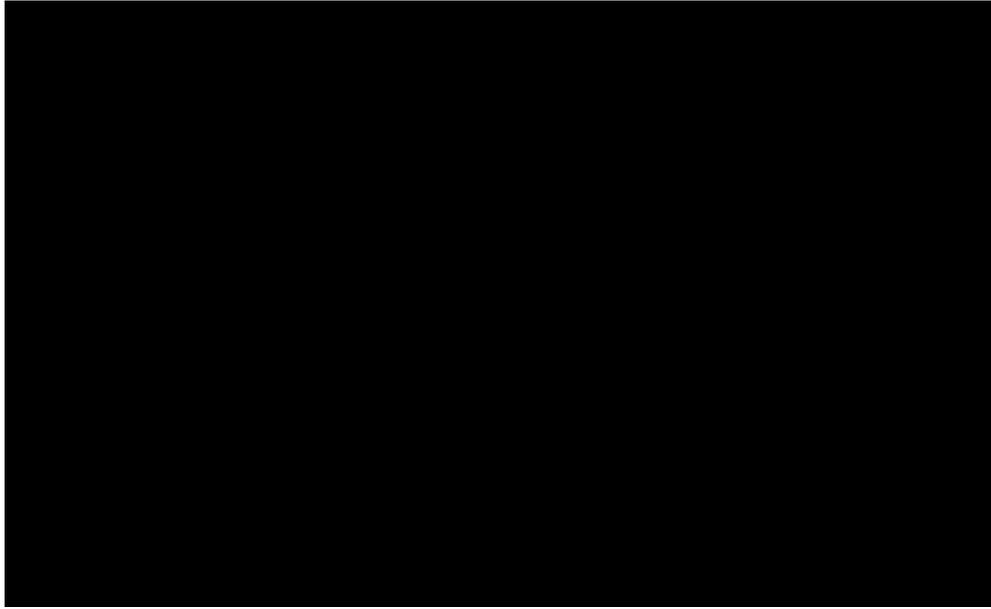
So cut a few numbers, work in some stronger songs, and when a new host with more gravitas (and singing ability) arrives to set the right tone, what's already one of the most enjoyable shows around will become even better. By all rights, with smart choices in the guest stars, changes in numbers if only to encourage repeat attendance and take advantage of new cast members and that terrific big band playing classic songs, it should run for years.

LA SOIREE *** out of ****
UNION SQUARE THEATRE

I'm not a natural fan of burlesque and audience participation gives me the hives. So

I'm not the ideal audience for *La Soiree*, to say the least. But this and similar shows have been playing the city with increasing frequency and I finally overcame my innate shyness (a beer or two helped) to join in the spirit of the thing and clap and cheer along an evening of intentionally bad jokes, campy singing, more than a little skin and some clever sideshow acts of gymnastics and derring-do all presented with a naughty air that's suitable for your grandmother or your mates. We're given a gander at full frontal female nudity but it's those who favor objectifying men that get the most bang from their buck. As long as there are bachelorette parties, *La Soiree* should be well-booked with enthusiastic audiences.

It's a sexy, silly show and if you're in the proper mood, a satisfying one, too. Singers follow jugglers who follow gymnastics and sword swallowers (okay, table leg swallowers) and comics and more singing and all of it served up with a good amount of skin for those who like their titillation presented with a wink. (Or was that a leer?)



Meow Meow is perhaps the artistic highlight of the show, a genuinely unique singer who combines a very pushy persona to hilarious effect while emoting in a manner that's both funny and affecting. She can really sing, but it's her comic asides that really stick with you. At one point, she's being held aloft by four or five audience members while belting out a number and demanding they rotate her for the full swastika effect. (Weimar-era Germany is never far from her heart.)

Speaking of comics, I thought a little of Mario, Queen Of The Circus would go a long way. He juggled to the tune of a Queen song and extolled his love for Freddie Mercury. But somehow even this tired schtick became appealing in his deft hands; I actually looked forward to his return each and every time... even if it did mean scrambling to pitch in when he went crowd-surfing. A sing-along to another Queen song? Jokes about how the cast likes to have casual sex with audience members but he goes home alone and slips into bed with just one or two people? Why not?

La Soiree does have rather more audience participation than I'd prefer. I would have liked a few more acts of talent, however off-beat, in place of some of it. But then. I'm a curmudgeon. Mooky Cornish has a rather long, drawn-out bit recruiting yet another audience member to help her perform a dramatic monologue. At least it could be speeded up a bit but her routine did build to a satisfying finale of them duetting on a li-synched version of a song from *West Side Story*. The man next to me assumed the audience member had to be a plant; how else could they have pulled it off? I assured him all she had to do was make sure the man she dragged on stage was gay and they'd be fine. *West Side Story*? Check. Karaoke experience? Check.

In sum, despite the abundance of fans in the spotlight, most everything brought at least a smile to the face, from Jess Love's mega-Hula Hooping to Miss Behave's various freak show stunts to Ursula Martinez's a very funny bit in Spanish to her hide-the-red-hankie strip tease. And the beefcake was considerable. Stephen Williams did a clever spin on aerial work by donning tight jeans and splashing about in a bathtub, playfully spraying audience members when not flying up into the air. It was pure sex appeal, thanks to his fit body and some amusing choreography. The English Gents (Denis Lock and Hamish McCann) were even more shameless, doing some clever gymnastics in Saville Row suits before tossing them off and showing off Union Jack boxers.

But the most impressive gymnastics came with the smaller, sexier McCann doing a

solo bit where he showed off some remarkable upper body strength while seeming to defy gravity by walking up air whilst holding onto a pole at center stage -- all while maintaining perfect, pointed toes form worthy of international competition. Like much of this diverting, exactly-what-you'd expect burlesque, it's a highly skilled stunt made to look easy by a performer who has devoted years of effort to accomplishing exactly that. *La Soiree* and its mix of humor and stunts and smut you could handle seated next to your grandmother does much the same.

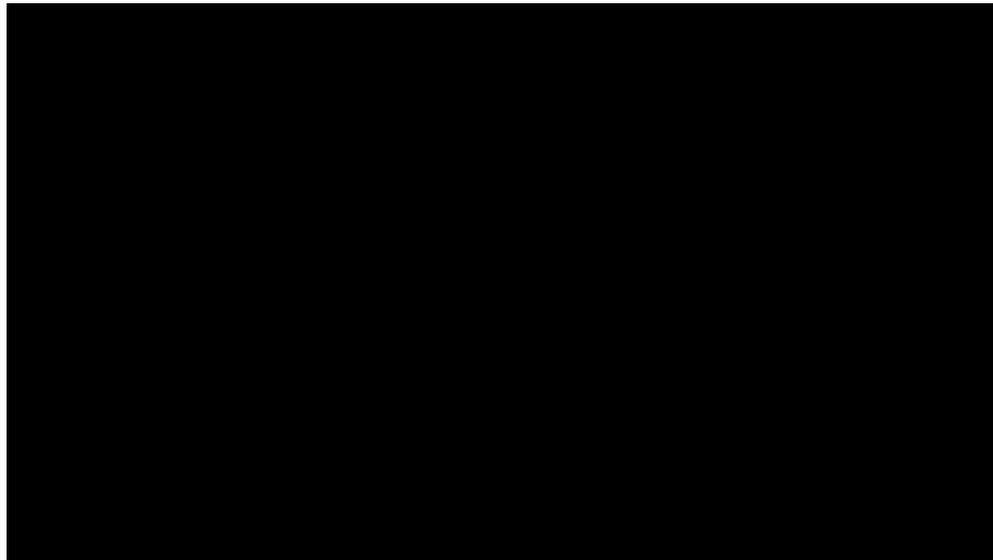
NOTHING TO HIDE ** 1/2 out of ****
SIGNATURE THEATRE

This enjoyable two-man magic show begins with a brilliant bit that hints at the truly great act Helder Guimaraes and Derek Delgaudio might become. The set is elegant and arresting: its back wall is filled with shelves boasting row upon row of glass bottles, each one containing a deck of cards. The shiny black floor reflects that striking series of shelves in an elegant style. On the stage under the spotlight is a small table with a deck of cards and one of those timers you see at chess games where each player hits their button after making a move.

The two magicians stride out and sit at the table, facing each other in stern anticipation, bathed in a spotlight while the rest of the stage remains in shadow. They begin to mix the cards in elaborate fashion, spreading them out, fanning them, shuffling and cutting and spreading them out and mixing them up again. Finally, after much deliberation and staring down -- oh, it's on! -- one of them seems to choose a card at random and it's the ace of one suit. He then hits the timer with a flourish. The other also seems to randomly pull out a card from what we believe to be a thoroughly shuffled pile and it's the ace of another suit. The first man takes the deck and shuffles and cuts and -- zip -- out pops the Two card in his suit. The other does a quick cut and reveals his own Two card. Slap! Slap! They each hit the timer with a flourish after their move. Back and forth they go, each time seeming to draw out the exact card by happenstance in various methods. One of them ups the pressure by revealing three cards in a row, slapping the timer again and again with verve. The other does the same. They are each concealing a key card from the other's suit up their sleeves. Back and forth, again and again.

It's a wonderful magic trick; obviously they're working in tandem to allow the other to pull out the cards they need in precisely the way they have planned. But it's also a genuine bit of wordless theater, with the audience laughing and clapping and oohing along as they compete with each other to finish their run of cards first and it comes to a satisfying conclusion. They build on this duo act in modest ways for the rest of the show, but nothing quite matches this or fulfills the promise it hints at.

Here's [TheaterMania](#) talking with the magicians and director Neil Patrick Harris about the show.



Certainly, Harris has directed *Nothing To Hide* with aplomb; the use of music and lighting is exemplary. But he should have pushed them even further in the direction of a genuine show, not just a magic act, since that's where their unique potential lies. Helder and Derek spar back and forth as they conjure forth various bits of sleight of hand and elaborate stunts. But they don't have personas that are well-defined enough to create the genuine dynamic of a comic duo. Has there even been a magic comic duo with personalities a la Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello or Burns and Allen who created a genuine work of theater around those personalities?

Obviously, Penn and Teller come to mind. They have distinct personalities but I don't think they've created moments of theater the way the opening number in this show did. They create great magic tricks, of course, peppered with sophisticated humor. Helder and Derek could do even more by creating an evening where the magic is embedded in the story of their competition, their friendship, their interplay, with each bit extending the story or how we see their friendship even further.

Perhaps this isn't their intent or where their interest lies. But it's a tantalizing possibility and they have the chemistry and skill to accomplish it, once they find the right dynamic to define them and play one off the other. Jokes about their nationalities are not enough. Anyone expecting a magic act will be perfectly satisfied by this evening of fun. It would be helpful to hint in the advertising or make clear with an off-hand comment at the start that they'll be doing strictly magic around a deck of cards. It's not disappointing that they didn't do other types of magic, but audiences would be better prepared to know this upfront rather than figure it out as the evening goes on.

The evening builds and builds to what is seemingly the most elaborate trick that of course involves that wall of glass bottles, each one containing a deck of cards. They have a flair for the dramatic, good patter and are quick with dealing with the usual audience comments. But Helder and Derek showed with that opener they can create magic on stage without any tricks at all beyond their acting and a well-crafted script. A magic act where the magic feels like a bonus or a perfectly embedded facet of the story? Now that would be astonishing.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

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
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **

The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *
Women Or Nothing ** 1/2
Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play * 1/2
You Never Can Tell ***
Romeo And Juliet *
Arguendo **
August Wilson's American Century Cycle ****
The Glass Menagerie ** 1/2
Lady Day * 1/2
Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse ****
Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical ** 1/2
Bronx Bombers * 1/2
Romeo & Juliet at CSC * 1/2
A Night With Janis Joplin **
The Winslow Boy ***
Juno And The Paycock **
How I Learned To Drive **
Fun Home **
Two Boys at the Met **
Big Fish **
A Time To Kill * 1/2
Year Of The Rooster ***
The Snow Geese ** 1/2
A Midsummer Night's Dream ** 1/2
The Lady in Red Converses With Diablo ** 1/2

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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.

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