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THE BLOG

Theater: Cracked "China Doll," A "C" For "School Of Rock," New Bacharach And New Standards

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- [CHINA DOLL](#) * out of ****
- [SCHOOL OF ROCK](#) * 1/2 out of **** but *** out of **** on cute scale
- [NEW YORK ANIMALS](#) ** 1/2 out of ****
- [THE NEW STANDARDS HOLIDAY SHOW](#) *** out of ****

OK, so the theatrical season is ending on a pretty grumpy note, with coal in the stockings of several shows. Luckily, music comes to the rescue. Here we go.

[CHINA DOLL](#) * out of **** [GERALD SCHOENFELD THEATRE](#)

Well, no reason to pile on. *China Doll* is not a good play. But let's make a few points: a bad play is a lot harder to memorize than a good play. At least that's always been my thinking. And even the greats rarely produce great works of art throughout their careers. Most often, they have a fertile period of ten to 15 years or so...and then they repeat themselves, plow the same land with decreasing yields and every once in a while do something good that reminds you of why they're great. Not something great, mind you. But something good.

So David Mamet is not being lazy or indifferent. He's a playwright and that's what he does. Sure it's been a long time since he delivered a great one. But asking him not to write plays is like asking Woody Allen to not make movies. On the other hand, Mamet enjoyed a creative outlet via the cinema since often you need to turn to a new form to find anything new to say or at least not repeat yourself. Maybe he'll deliver another really good play or movie someday. But Mamet's great work is behind him and

there's no shame in that.

China Doll feels no more (or less) half-baked than Mamet's other work in recent years. And a bad play rarely brings out the best in actors. Pacino was positively brilliant five years ago in *The Merchant Of Venice*. Is he lost here? Who wouldn't be? Act one showing a brash 1 percenter looking to dodge taxes and maybe get out of dodge with a pretty young wife while he still can seemed pretty awful. But act two made act one seem positively pleasant in retrospect.

The set, the costumes, the sound design -- literally everything seems off key. But it's hardly worth hashing over. Co-star Christopher Denham has a secondary role that's blandly anonymous and then inevitably takes a turn. Not the turn one expected, but not a good turn, just hard to believe and uninteresting. The ending is a shocker only in the sense that you can hardly tell how anyone expects it to play -- seriously, jokingly, tragically, blackly? I've no idea.

It's all a little sad. One hates to see great artists slog their way through inferior material. And I marvel at actors who have to go out on stage and do it all again the next night. It must be a particular circle of hell to be stuck in a show you know isn't going to work. Oddly, I can't wait for them to tackle something else because a legendary partnership like theirs should not end on a note like this.

SCHOOL OF ROCK * 1/2 out of **** but *** out of **** on cute scale
WINTER GARDEN THEATRE

It's a bland xerox of the movie -- right down to the creepily specific casting of child actors who by and large fit the ethnic roles of their movie counterparts. The lead actor is doing Jack Black redux. The classic rock songs (all stolen by *Rock Of Ages*, apparently) are replaced by bland

Broadway songs posing as rock tunes thanks to the occasional electric guitar or drum solo.

And if I could invest in it, I would.

Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber hasn't had a hit in the US or UK in at least 20 years. Whistle Down The Wind in 1996 was his last triumph in the West End. Sunset Blvd. was his last hit (of a sort) in the US, though if you want to talk profitability, one has to go back 30 years to Phantom Of The Opera. The man who once dominated the boards like no one ever had before or since has faced a long, long drought.

That drought is over with *School Of Rock*, a critic-proof musical that apparently doesn't need to be critic-proof. (Others seemed to be kind to it, though I've only heard this second-hand.) It will probably make money on Broadway and on tour and in the UK. But it's really going to clean up in school and community productions. In the show, the parents watch their kids rocking out at the finale with unabashed joy. Imagine the same taking place in town after town and you'll realize the power of this showcase for kids.

If you've seen the movie, you've seen the show, right down to the strong casting of cute as a button kids jamming out on bass, guitar, drums, keyboards and vocals. Very, very little is different, though a song and scene or two clarifies how the kids have parents too consumed with work to pay them much attention. Enter Dewey Finn, a struggling musician who poses as a substitute teacher at a snooty private school, turns his class of misfits into rock gods and enters the local battle of the bands so they can bond with their parents and put glitter in their hair at the finale. Lessons will be learned.

The big change is the music. The foolproof fun of seeing talented kids jam

out on classics (It's cute! I'll admit it.) is replaced by a clutch of originals with music by Lloyd Webber and lyrics by Glenn Slater, whose best work is on Disney's *Tangled*. They are vaguely peppy and rock-ish. True, Lloyd Webber began by bringing rock to Broadway with *Jesus Christ Superstar*, but he's always been a traditionalist at heart. (It's no wonder his best work harkens back to classical music.) His music may be plugged in but it's resolutely old-fashioned.

No matter. The first act boasts two fun production numbers. "You're In The Band" is the show's early highlight (and presumably the one they'll do on the Tony's unless they've lost their minds.) The amiable Alex Brightman encourages his charges to loosen up and jam out. As each one struts their stuff, he proclaims "You're in the band!" and the fun builds and builds. You've also got a faux protest song called "Stick It To The Man" for another relative barn burner. The songs aren't actually good (Lloyd Webber is usually good for at least one killer melody a show; not here). But they get the job done.

However, act two grinds to a halt, with multiple stops for fake confrontations, the tiresome cliché of a bitchy girlfriend who must be upbraided by her mousey man and hugs all around at the end. Worst of all, Sierra Boggess is the uptight principal of the school that the kids attend. She's a secret fan of Stevie Nicks but (inexplicably) also wanders the halls belting out opera. She and Dewey go on a date, a snatch of the Nicks' classic "Edge Of Seventeen" gets the juices flowing...and then Boggess must warble her way through "Where Did The Rock Go?," the blandest, least rockin' ode to rock and roll in the history of the world. It would be laughable -- a schmaltzy Broadway ballad bemoaning the disappearance of "real" rock and roll, if you didn't ache so for Boggess. It's practically her only number, other than a bizarre curtain call reprise of some Mozart.

The blandness of act two isn't worth covering, but one crucial example sticks out. The shy Tomika (Bobbi MacKenzie) rarely speaks and can't say what she wants to do in this class project. (Others are musicians or back-up singers or stylists or roadies and so on.) Our hero asks her what she wants to be but this mute, mostly sad looking child doesn't know what to say. He says, well let me know and literally forgets about her. It isn't until act two that she finally speaks up (through no prompting of his) and says she wants to sing and does. (To prove it, she sings "Amazing Grace," another bizarre musical choice only defended by being in the public domain and thus cheap. Otherwise, it makes no sense in a show embracing rock and roll.) At the end Tomika tells her gay dads (it's that kind of show) that her teacher inspired and encouraged her. Uh, no he didn't! Would it have killed the show to have Dewey reach out sweetly

several times to Tomika, trying to draw her out of her shell and showing his own growth as a person? It's an obvious lapse in the by the numbers book by Julian Fellowes of *Downton Abbey* fame.

The audience doesn't care. The production is ugly, the musical choices bland, the originals anonymous, and most every element just cribs from the movie. But the kids lock into a song and show their pizzazz and the crowd eats it up. Hell, if I had kids (and I'd already taken them to *Matilda* and *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*), I'd take them to this harmless show as well. But on the ride home we'd blast Led Zeppelin and The Ramones and Jimi Hendrix, not the score to *School Of Rock*.

NEW YORK ANIMALS ** 1/2 out of ****

NEW OHIO THEATRE

Bedlam is one of the best theater troupes in New York City right now, smartly inventive and bold. I can't wait for the return of [their marvelous adaptation of *Sense And Sensibility*](#) in January, a charmer that deserves to transfer to Broadway.

Up first is this foray into a musical or to be exact a string of sketches interspersed by songs. It's more of a song cycle than a full blown show. The New Ohio Theater has been turned into a cabaret and the live band on stage is excellent. A number of sketches painting the lonely, desperate lives of New Yorkers follow, brought to life by the five member cast (augmented by a band member once or twice). It's the usual array: a world weary waitress, a kook that her "friends" both humor and try to avoid, the lovelorn, married couples fraying at the edge and so on. Between the sketches, songs are sung by the band.

Steven Sater of *Spring Awakening* is the playwright and lyricist. And something is missing. The cast is strong and each of them has a particular moment -- or numerous moments -- where they shine and bring these broken people to life. True, the sketches overlap: characters slowly reveal connections to one another and many of them converge at a hospital emergency room at the finale. But they don't build, somehow, on one another. Whatever invisible thread is needed to unite them is missing. Some sketches are stronger than others. But once you feel the inherent randomness at play here (there could have been five sketches or 15 or 50), they become somehow a little exhausting. Without sensing an overarching structure (however unspoken), our confidence in where the play is going is lost. I'm not speaking of an Atman-esque community of folk (in fact, this show attempts just that) but something subtler and more essential. I don't know what it is, but it's not here.

Still, the sketches work okay on their own terms thanks to the excellent

cast directed by fellow performer Eric Tucker. But the songs! Sater collaborated with the great Burt Bacharach, who has enjoyed a creative renaissance in recent years by collaborating with the likes of Elvis Costello and Ronald Isley. He hits the jackpot again with Sater. Their songs feature the distinctive, sophisticated arrangements that made Bacharach famous and lyrics among Sater's best.

And they're put across with aplomb by the band, led by pianist and singer Debra Barsha and lead singer Jo Lampert, who has great presence and great chops (and great earrings). It's no small compliment to say they make these songs sound easy, since Bacharach's tunes rarely are. But they're gems. I want to see Lampert in concert, soon. I want to hear the songs again. I would have purchased a CD with the tunes before leaving the theater. If this had been a 45 minute cabaret act introducing this as a song cycle, it would have been a triumph. As it is, you're reminded of the many talented members of Bedlam even in less than ideal settings. But mostly you just want to sit back and listen to another song.

[THE NEW STANDARDS HOLIDAY SHOW](#)*** out of ****
[DAVID RUBENSTEIN ATRIUM AT LINCOLN CENTER](#)

Whew! Just when I felt like a grinch, along come [The New Standards](#) to put me in a buoyant mood! This Minneapolis super group is composed of members from beloved indie bands like The Suburbs and Trip Shakespeare. Their reason for being is establishing the new rock standards, celebrating the tunes from pop music that deserve being covered again and again as much as the greats of Tin Pan Alley. Typically, they do so with their swinging trio of piano (Chan Poling), bass (John Munson) and vibraphone (the geekily sexy Steve Roehm). [You can check out their new album right now.](#)

They've also got an annual tradition of doing holiday shows where the band is augmented with horns and guitar players and backup singers and a passel of friends. It's all goofy fun, with a slightly left of center sensibility giving a wickedly fun but sincere spin to holiday classics. For their third holiday show in New York City, the band returned to the David Rubenstein Atrium Of Lincoln Center, a public space filled with free concerts throughout the year. It has a slightly bright sound that is less than ideal, but it hardly matters with this crowd. The audience arrived early to secure seats and were clearly returnees bringing along friends to convert them to the new standards of The New Standards.

They began with New Order but soon plunged into various and sundry tunes. The fare ranged from "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas" to "I've Got My Love To Keep Me Warm." The vibe was very 1950s TV special (the excellent vibes of Roehm helped), though more traditional tunes also popped in. Fred Schneider of The B-52s barked out new lyrics to "The 12 Days Of Christmas" in a typically goofy number. Julian Fleischer was the perfect guest, swinging his way through numerous standards and bantering with ease. (By his third or fourth number, Fleischer's vocals were truly impressive.)

[Chris Koza](#) (a musician worth checking out in his own right) multi-tasked by playing guitar, delivering backing vocals, competing with Roehm in low-key charm, and then stepping forward with one of the night's best numbers. He sang "Walking In The Air," from the British TV special *The Snowman*. That Oscar-nominated film is a beloved animation classic in the UK, played every holiday and akin to its place in popular culture to *A Charlie Brown Christmas* here. Frankly, the song is schmaltzy in the original and when they mentioned this was the song Koza would tackle I was wary. But his arrangement and vocals won me over and convinced there was a genuinely good song hiding under that children's choir. Who knew?

But as she always does, [the marvelous Nellie McKay](#) stole the show. (Always polite, she handed it right back.) McKay came out in a Dietrich-like tuxedo and sang a tune in a thick German accent, puzzling but delighting the uninitiated and thrilling her fans. New lyrics also added spice when it became a medley. (I think.) She returned later with green face paint and dressed as a marijuana plant to rap to her song about wanting weed for Christmas. As she chirped delightfully about the fact that a huge portion of prisoners in the US are in there for non-violent, marijuana related offenses -- and made it swing! -- all you could do was smile and declare your love. (And campaign to [take marijuana off the federal list of Schedule 1 drugs.](#))

The band was wonderful throughout. Even when indulging this or that

friend in a number less than luminous, their playing made the evening a pleasure. Har Mar Superstar got funky and the show proper somehow ended with the disco classic "Ring My Bell" and it all made sense.

You can [catch The New Standards on Saturday December 19 in Rochester, MN](#). Here in NYC, we'll just have to wait until next year.

THEATER OF 2015

[Honeymoon In Vegas](#) **

[The Woodsman](#) ***

[Constellations](#) ** 1/2

[Taylor Mac's A 24 Decade History Of Popular Music 1930s-1950s](#) ** 1/2

[Let The Right One In](#) **

[Da](#) no rating

[A Month In The Country](#) ** 1/2

[Parade](#) in Concert at Lincoln Center ** 1/2

[Hamilton](#) at the Public ***

[The World Of Extreme Happiness](#) ** 1/2

[Broadway By The Year 1915-1940](#) **

[Verite](#) * 1/2

[Fabulous!](#) *

[The Mystery Of Love & Sex](#) **

[An Octoroon at Polonsky Shakespeare Center](#) *** 1/2

[Fish In The Dark](#) *

[The Audience](#) ***

[Josephine And I](#) ***

[Posterity](#) * 1/2

[The Hunchback Of Notre Dame](#) **

[Lonesome Traveler](#) **

[On The Twentieth Century](#) ***

[Radio City Music Hall's New York Spring Spectacular](#) ** 1/2
[The Heidi Chronicles](#) *
[The Tallest Tree In The Forest](#) * 1/2
[Broadway By The Year: 1941-1965](#) ***
[Twelfth Night](#) by Bedlam ***
[What You Will](#) by Bedlam *** 1/2
[Wolf Hall Parts I and II](#) ** 1/2
[Skylight](#) ***
[Nellie McKay](#) at 54 Below ***
[Ludic Proxy](#) ** 1/2
[It Shoulda Been You](#) **
[Finding Neverland](#) ** 1/2
[Hamlet](#) w Peter Sarsgaard at CSC no stars
[The King And I](#) ***
[Marilyn Maye -- Her Way: A Tribute To Frank Sinatra](#) at 54 Below ***
[Gigi](#) * 1/2
[An American In Paris](#) ** 1/2
[Doctor Zhivago](#) no stars
[Fun Home](#) **
[Living On Love](#) * 1/2
[Early Shaker Spirituals: A Record Album Interpretation](#) ***
[Airline Highway](#) * 1/2
[The Two Gentlemen Of Verona](#) (Fiasco Theatre) ***
[The Visit](#) (w Chita Rivera) ** 1/2
[The Sound And The Fury](#) (ERS) **
[Broadway By The Year: 1966-1990](#) ***
[The Spoils](#) * 1/2
[Ever After](#) (at Papermill) **
[Heisenberg](#) *** 1/2
[An Act Of God](#) **
[The National High School Musical Theatre Awards](#) ***
[Amazing Grace](#) *
[The Absolute Brightness Of Leonard Pelkey](#) ** 1/2
[Cymbeline](#) (Shakespeare in the Park w Rabe and Linklater) ***
[Hamilton](#) *** 1/2
[The Christians](#) ***
[A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) (Pearl Theatre Company) ** 1/2
[Spring Awakening](#) (w Deaf Theatre West) *** 1/2
[Daddy Long Legs](#) **
[Reread Another](#) **
[Fool For Love](#) (w Nina Arianda and Sam Rockwell) ** 1/2
[Barbecue](#) (at Public) **
[Old Times](#) (w Clive Owen) **
[The Bandstand](#) ***

[The Gin Game](#) **
[Rothschild & Sons](#) ** 1/2
[The Inn At Lake Devine](#) **
[First Daughter Suite](#) ** 1/2
[The Humans](#) *** 1/2
[Sylvia](#) **
[Dames At Sea](#) ** 1/2
[Ripcord](#) **
[Hir](#) **
[Thérèse Raquin](#) *
[King Charles III](#) *** 1/2
[Henry IV](#) (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) ***
[On Your Feet](#) **
[Misery](#) * out of ****
[A View From The Bridge](#) *** out of ****
[Allegiance](#) ** 1/2 out of ****
[China Doll](#) *
[School Of Rock](#) * 1/2
[New York Animals](#) ** 1/2
[The New Standards Holiday Show](#) ***

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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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CONVERSATIONS

