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THE PUBLIC THEATER

When is a show a master stroke and a missed opportunity at the same time? When it's a remounting of the Elevator Repair Service's adaptation of William Faulkner's *The Sound And The Fury*. That acclaimed production from 2008 made the name of ERS and spurred them on to further success like *Gatz*. Now they've put their money where their mouth is for a commercial run, giving those who missed it the first time around a chance to see . It's a financial leap of faith even for a company that has proven itself via some sixteen different shows; Faulkner is hardly box office magic. Happily, the line for stand-by was lengthy the performance I attended, so ERS will have made a shrewd investment in its legacy.

But the missed opportunity is my reaction to excitedly seeing *The Sound And The Fury* for the first time. The 1929 novel is famously confounding in the initial section devoted to Benjy, the lengthy section they've chosen to adapt. Benjy is mentally challenged and Faulkner chose to leap back and forth in time almost at random. In some passages Benjy is a little boy, in others a teen and still others around 30 years old. Faulkner offers no rhyme or reason and unprepared readers are often bewildered. The rest of the book is straightforward and once you've got a handle on it, the Benjy section is hilarious and bleak and moving . All readers need is a little guidance. (You can search for "tips on how to read *The Sound And The Fury* for a very simple key to the text that won't spoil it at all.) So a stage adaptation? Perfect. With actors playing certain roles along with visual and audio cues, one could easily make the leaps in time crystal clear without sacrificing the spirit of the work.

After all, an adaptation is supposed to offer something new and ERS might have offered a "Benjy" play that was moving and funny and brutal and sad. Surely you want people seeing the show to get excited about this masterpiece? Surely you want them to rush out and say, "What have I been waiting for? Let's read the book!" Instead, one imagines that most audience members will be just as perplexed at the end of this show as they were at the beginning. Reading the book will be the last thing on their mind, unless it's with the conviction that there must be more to it than this.

Worse, now that I've seen three ERS adaptations of classic novels, their approach begins to seem a set formula. If you adapt three writers as distinctive and different as Ernest Hemingway (*The Sun Also Rises*), F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*) and Faulkner, one would expect three radically different approaches to the material at hand, approaches that were very sympathetic to the wildly unique voices of the authors. But that doesn't seem the case. As with *Gatz*, *The Sound And The Fury* is given a framing device. Here it seems more random and pointless: a family gathering at Christmas.

Bored relatives take to reading out passages of the book, often delivering them in a flat, affectless style. That's

contrasted with non sequiturs that pop in, such as random silly dances punctuating certain scenes. While the novel *The Sound And The Fury* cries out for some clarity, they chose to have different actors tackle the same roles...and NOT assign actors to different stages of Benjy's life. Maybe that would have been an obvious choice, but it certainly would have helped to have a clue as to what is going on and when. Audiences will get the general gist but not much more.

Essentially (and plot is not the point since much of it is revealed at the start), we are seeing a Mississippi family of some renown fallen on hard times and sinking farther. The sons turn to suicide or bitterness, the daughters cat around and the "idiot" Benjy is seen by most as a symbol of their disgrace. (The times are not kind to the mentally challenged.)

A few moments stand out, such as children arguing with vehemence in the kitchen when they're supposed to keep quiet; the genuine sense of chaos they create is a highlight of the night. But time and again, I was thinking of what was missing from the book: Faulkner's spot-on depiction of the feuding and one-upmanship that typifies siblings; the subtle shading of race relations; and most of all the humor. (This evening is only amusing in asides, whereas Faulkner's text is wickedly funny on virtually every page.)

And I felt I'd seen this approach before, though of course Gatz came after. Would I have liked that show less if I'd seen *The Sound And The Fury* first? Perhaps not, since *The Great Gatsby* is easily digestible and a model of clarity; that show simply hung together more readily. Still, it's telling that my estimation of their three "novels" chart a downward path. Whatever order you see these shows in, the formula is wearing thin.

BROADWAY BY THE YEAR: 1966-1990 *** out of **** **TOWN HALL**

It's hard to predict the future, but not if you're talking about [Broadway By The Year](#). This theater institution created by [Scott Siegel](#) -- yes, after 15 years, it's officially an institution -- ends its current season on June 22 at Town Hall. They'll have at least 25 stars celebrating shows from 1990 to 2014. I guarantee the following: you'll see Broadway and cabaret stars, you'll enjoy some nifty dancing, you'll hear songs you've never heard before (unless you're REALLY a Broadway baby) and you'll discover some new talent you'll want to see again, soon.

Am I psychic? No, but that's exactly what [Broadway By The Year](#) has delivered consistently for years now. Its current successful format takes place during the first half of the year in four parts. each night tackles 25 years of Broadway history and thus invariably turns up some nuggets that are new to you. Indeed, the most recent edition on May 11 did all of this, despite acts bedeviled by the various ailments of spring that led to some last minutes cancellations. Because of this, the excellent first half was stronger than the second. But it was still a great bargain and a worthwhile evening.

It was a heart-tugger of a night, coming right after Mother's Day. Jenny Powers led off the night with a lovely "Where Am I Going?" from *Sweet Charity*, proudly showing off the baby she's apparently due to deliver any minute. The young Mercer Patterson delivered the shamelessly maudlin "Mama, A Rainbow" from *Minnie's Boys*, but when he's a little kid and the son of the show's musical director Ross Patterson and it's dedicated to his mom AND he's such a newbie he forgot to bow during the applause, well, maudlin can be forgiven.

That crowd-pleaser was followed immediately by Jamison Stern delivering "The Kite" from *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*, which was a nice example of an adult playing a kid without cloying sentimentality. (Thanks in part to the sensibility of Charles Schulz that the show faithfully captured.) But the real highlight in many ways was the appearance of Tony nominee Lorraine Serabian singing "Life Is" from *Zorba*, a musical given a recent showcase by *Encores*. Serabian earned plaudits when she debuted the song in the original production in 1968 and here she was more than 40 years later singing the tune with zest and passion and panache. Everyone was delighted but none more so than Serabian herself, who was having a blast.

Of course, nights like this are always a mixed bag. I wasn't wowed by Gabrielle Stravelli's take on "Time Heals Everything," but she ended the first half of the night with the far jazzier and looser "Keepin' Out Of Mischief Now," a number turned into a nifty duet between her and tapper Noah Racey that was thoroughly engaging. Clearly, this is Stravelli's metier.

The always delightful Mary Testa probably chose the wrong venue and crowd to put over her mind-bending deconstruction of "The Look Of Love." I enjoyed it -- it's Testa, after all -- but a more intimate venue might have been a better frame for this rendition. And no one can make me enjoy most of the music from Chess, so despite a committed performance by Jessica Hendy and the [Broadway By The Year](#) chorus (talent spotted and championed by Siegel), when "Nobody's Side" ended all I could do was wonder why theater folk remain enchanted by this bloodless show and its mechanical score. And the evening's closer "Oh Boy!" by Buddy Holly (taken from the hit jukebox musical Buddy, of course) is a great pop record but not a terribly interesting tune to cover, though Danny Gardner gave it the college try.

Happily, Patrick Page delivered the tongue twister "Cyrano's Nose" from *Cyrano* with aplomb. The trio of Gardner, Brent McBeth and Drew Humphrey sang and danced smoothly through "Nice Work If You Can Get It." And while the always charming and impressive Tony nominee Bobby Steggert was not at 100% vocally (that damn bug!), he offered an illuminating version of Sondheim's "Not A Day Goes By" nevertheless; when so many others merely seem to be singing, Steggert is always acting -- his singing flows with purpose and insight, never calling attention to itself. Also engaging was a rare instrumental performance from Ross Patterson's Little Big Band. They swung the Supremes' number "Stop! In The Name Of Love" with excellent vigor; an instrumental from them would be a welcome bonus at every show.

Nonetheless, the show stopper of the night belonged to William Blake. He sang "Home" from *The Wiz* and simply tore it apart. Not by trilling and tossing out run after run like so many would-be Mariah Careys, but by digging deep into the melody, presenting it with feeling and care...and then building and building it until the runs and gospel inflections that others toss in willy nilly made perfect emotional and artistic sense. Blake is a genuine and unique talent and announced he's going to be recording a new album this summer. Everyone who saw him sing this song is unquestionably just as excited to hear it as I am. It's the sort of moment that makes evenings like this memorable and unmissable.

This video isn't from [Broadway By The Year](#) (and gosh, I hope someone has been recording and archiving the show visually, or at least the audio). It's [William Blake](#) at Birdland, a taste of what this artist can do.

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