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THE SPOILS * 1/2 out of ****

EVER AFTER ** out of ****

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THE NEW GROUP AT THE PERSHING SQUARE SIGNATURE THEATRE

It's shaping up to be a stellar year for Jesse Eisenberg. He has a collection of short stories (Bream Gives Me Hiccups) due out September 8. He's got several strong festival films due out in the fall, including a flick about writer David Foster Wallace and one about a family recovering from the death of their mother. As a perfect caper to those art house projects, Eisenberg is the next Lex Luthor, has a sequel to Now You See Me and a role in the next Woody Allen movie.

And here he is writing and starring in a new play. You might think Eisenberg would write a role for himself that others haven't: a charming romance, for example. Instead, *The Spoils* is exactly what you might expect for a stereotypical Eisenberg role. He plays a hyper-verbal, prickly, downright unlikable fellow with obsessions and rages and simmering self-loathing. Romance can wait.

Wisely, Eisenberg is surrounded by a strong cast and the capable direction of Scott Elliott. *The Spoils* wears out its welcome long before it's over (and long after we realize it doesn't know where it's going) but it's certainly given a first-class production any playwright would appreciate.

Eisenberg is Ben, a would-be filmmaker who enjoys the luxury of a nice apartment and endless funds to keep him happily situated while he (sort of) tries to make it in the movie industry. His roommate Kalyan (Kunal Nayyar) lives rent-free on Ben's insistence. Kalyan is Nepalese and he's written a book on the economic situation of his home country. Thanks to Ben's largesse, Kalyan doesn't have to deliver pizzas anymore. But despite an excellent degree and being a published author on economic issues, Kalyan can't seem to get entree to Wall Street so he can gain some practical experience. He's simply too self-effacing.

It could be worse. At least Kalyan has a girlfriend, the attractive and driven Reshma (a fun Annapurna Sriram) who can barely contain her disdain for the rude and overbearing Ben. Ben is so filled with quirks and lies and self-destructive egomania that it's no surprise he doesn't have a girlfriend. Of course, Ben would be the first to insist he doesn't want one. Then he unexpectedly bumps into a kid he grew up with named Ted (Michael Zegen). Ben is flummoxed to hear Ted is marrying his first and only crush Sarah (Erin Darke, solid). Ben immediately invites them over with the implausible scheme of reminding Sarah how much they liked each other when they were eight, ending her engagement and getting Sarah for himself. Needless to say, it doesn't end well.

Ben is a confusing character. For the first 30 minutes, he has an aggressive energy that keeps the show lively. First, Ben has a playful bromance of a friendship with Kalyan, who seems both understanding of Ben's insecurities and the only person who can keep Ben in check. It's a genuinely odd friendship and not simply a case of Ben dominating Kalyan or Kalyan sucking up to keep his free room. The comic momentum grows with the introduction of Ted, an amusingly simple financial dude who takes people at face value and always seems to be laughing two or three steps behind everyone else but doesn't really mind. Both Nayyar of *The Big Bang Theory* and Zegen (who was acclaimed for *Bad Jews*) are excellent, especially early on.

Yet just as we think we know Ben and his relationship with Kalyan, it shifts into something entirely new. When Sarah shows up, Ben is not dominating in a hatefully pushy manner; he's needy and ineffectually rude and the idea he might actually woo Sarah or even make it through the evening without being hospitalized is hard to swallow. His self-lacerating attitude grows more out of control to the point where you can't understand why everyone doesn't just stay away from his toxic meltdown. Ben's boasts and lies are sadly transparent to everyone but him. He never seems strong enough to bring anyone else down with him, so there's no real tension.

A very long first act is followed by a shorter but somehow more drawn-out second one. The story, which was always more intellectual fireworks than flesh and blood, becomes increasingly divorced from reality until the artificiality of it all becomes overwhelming. Revelations are made, characters behave in ways that make no sense and almost none of it adds up, down to the final speech and abrupt fade out. It's never a good sign when characters and plot grow more mystifying as the show goes on. Eisenberg has some good dialogue and deft characterization, but spoils whatever groundwork he and this cast accomplish at the start.

EVER AFTER ** out of **** **PAPERMILL PLAYHOUSE**

Cinderella is put through her paces yet again in a world premiere musical directed by Tony winner Kathleen Marshall. The actors are pros throughout and the presentation solid. But nothing can disguise the very familiar feeling of the modernized book and the mildly pleasant but difficult to remember songs and score of Ever After. Following on the heels of *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame*, Papermill has again showcased a work in the best possible light but it's not enough to make the work worthy of such care.

One could imagine the hit film's cachet and the easy familiarity of Cinderella might get this produced regionally and at community theaters. But it's hard to imagine why they wouldn't just choose the Rodgers & Hammerstein Cinderella instead, since that show has a spunkily modern book as well, not to mention much better songs.

You know the story, though in this umpteenth telling there are some songs but no real magic (in more than one sense of the word). Danielle nee Cinderella (Margo Seibert) has a wicked stepmother (Christine Ebersole), a cruel stepsister and a kind but ineffectual stepsister. She takes solace in her books a la Belle, especially Thomas More's *Utopia*, the last book her late father ever shared with Danielle.

The handsome Prince (James Snyder) doesn't really like the idea of an arranged marriage and runs away, only to cross paths with the commoner Danielle, who pummels him with apples for trying to steal her father's horse and then pummels him with quotes from *Utopia* when the Prince isn't suitably class conscious. They bicker, they fight, they kiss, she's afraid to reveal her lowly stature, the evil stepmother will do anything to make her spoiled daughter the next Queen and it all comes out in the wash.

Ever After has echoes of Disney's *Beauty And The Beast* and *Camelot* and a dozen other fairy tales, without ever really establishing a style or tone of its own.

It's also oddly conflict-free. Time and again, problems are raised and then immediately solved. A servant and friend of Danielle is wrongly accused of stealing and sent away? In the next scene Danielle receives gold coins and buys his freedom. The Prince balks over having to marry a Princess of Spain? The King quickly allows the Prince to marry whomever he chooses. The Prince and Danielle are kidnapped by gypsy thieves? They immediately declare her their Queen and start dancing for joy. Again and again, a plot twist threatens for just a moment before it's dismissed.

That book is by Marcy Heisler. It's not helped much by the songs (the music is by Zina Goldrich and the lyrics by Heisler). Most have a mid-tempo, gently comic tone to them and are fine enough. They just aren't memorable enough or worse, memorable for the wrong reasons like the tepid Act One closer "Out Of The Darkness" (which

of course follows that title with "into the light").

A handful of exceptions stand out. "Who Needs Love?" and "My Cousin's Cousin" are enjoyable amusing tunes, along with "Is There Anything Leonardo Can't Do?," a second act highlight with Marshall's most satisfying choreography and staging. But without question the show's peak moment dramatically and musically is Ebersole's rendition of "After All," in which the stepmother bares her soul to Danielle in the cruelest but most human fashion.

Indeed, the show is blessed with a strong cast (especially the women) that elevates the material tremendously. Seibert and Snyder are a handsome couple as Danielle and the Prince, doing what they can with rote material. Tony winner Ebersole almost single-handedly brings complexity to the show. But there's also the marvelous Julie Halston putting her droll spin on the Queen of France, Charles Shaughnessy as the King and Tony Sheldon as Leonardo Da Vinci. In utterly thankless smaller roles, Annie Funke must play the nice, curvier sister and endure fat jibes from her mother before inevitably getting spunky in the second act; while the delightful Andrew Keenan-Bolger has literally nothing to do but stand around and smile as Danielle's nominal best friend. (He's surely got his fingers crossed for a Broadway run from Tuck Everlasting, the new musical he starred in during its Atlanta debut.)

The tech elements were strong if simple, from the solid sound design of Nevin Steinberg to the orchestra it captured so well led by music director David Gardos. Derek McLane's scenic design was good, along with the costumes of Jess Goldstein, with the very notable exception of the silly costume designed for Danielle's entrance at the finale. She's given fairy wings but the effect is to make her look childish, not beguiling or magical.

Unlike so many musicals, it should be said that Act Two was superior to Act One. After a long buildup (ironically not helped by the overly familiar story at hand), Marshall put the pedal to the floor. While Act One was filled with time-killers (like that gypsy dance-off that was not one of Marshall's better efforts), Act Two positively sped along, moving briskly from one moment to the next. It wasn't enough to rescue the evening. But a strong cast and a quick-paced finale did at least send you home without having to wait forever to hear they'd be living happily ever after.

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