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Theater: "Farinelli" Off Key; Favorite Theater Of 2017

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FARINELLI AND THE KING ** out of ****

BELASCO THEATRE

No matter how you approach it, the new play *Farinelli and the King* is a notable — if noble — disappointment. If you're a fan of actor Mark Rylance, naturally any play he appears in has a shot at greatness. If you're familiar with opera and the castrati, you will anticipate hearing a countertenor (Iestyn Davies at my performance) delivering famous works by Handel in an approximation of that otherworldly sound, with arrangements by the playwright Claire van Kampen. (She is the wife of Rylance but it's safe to assume this spin on *The Madness Of King George* crossed with *Amadeus* as an ode to the healing power of art would have found its way to the stage in any case.) If you're a fan of sumptuous period settings, the chance to see the lovely Belasco decked out in Old World finery, peopled with period wigs and costumes and lit by candlelight will be tempting. And if you know the history of Farinelli or King Philippe V of Spain, the possibilities of dramatizing any piece of their remarkable lives is intriguing. What will they tackle and how? It's been tried before, on film and in opera and even on the radio, mostly with poor results. That trend continues here.

But first, the King must go fishing. In an amusing call-back to Rylance's delightfully offbeat work *Nice Fish* (which van Kampen directed), our first image is of King Philippe sitting up, holding a goldfish bowl and dropping a fishing line into it in hopes of baiting the inhabitant. Is he whimsical or mad? That's the question that bedevils the court of Spain which very much wants to go to war. Philippe would rather stay in bed (which is quite sensible of him) and chat with the goldfish (which, perhaps, is not). Rylance is of course witty and amusing and immediately has us on the side of this confused, unhappy but sometimes lucid King. His courtiers dance around, his resourceful wife Isabella (Melody Grove) keeps them and the demons at bay and the King plunges in and out of his mind with frightening speed, sometimes making all the sense in the world and sometimes biting his wife on the lip and drawing blood.

She is sent away — the Queen is merely a distraction, they say. But Isabella is also the main impediment to the Court simply declaring the King mad. Happily, her forced vacation takes her to London and the theater where she is deeply moved by the soaring, unearthly sound of Farinelli, the most famous castrato singer of his day and indeed all time. Showered with fame and fortune, Farinelli is deeply unhappy, seeing each performance as a trap in which he must evade the claws of his admirers. The Queen trades the birdcage of

the London stage for the jeweled prison of life at Court and he goes warily and wearily to see who this King of Spain might be.

In the show's best scene, Rylance and actor Sam Crane (who makes a fine impression as the wavering, unsteady singer) joust and test each other out. The King insists (jokingly?) that if Farinelli lies he'll be beheaded but the singer knows a test of honesty and empathy when he sees one and though both are uneasy they recognize the uneasiness of the other. They are sympathetic souls. And then Farinelli sings. The mad King finds peace for the first time in years and Farinelli becomes a favorite of the royal couple and the bane of the Court, which was quite ready to depose the King and move on to the next in line for the throne.

No one is ever happy and the King soon insists they move to the woods, away from the court, yes, but more importantly closer to nature. There Farinelli can sing under the stars and commune with the music of the spheres and they can all live simply and happily. But a world famous singer singing to a party of one? Is that happiness or heresy? And the more the King regains his equilibrium (he will never quite regain his sanity for long), the more the demands of Court will pull on him to leave this Eden and return to the role he too must play on the world's stage. Madness! Art! Romance! War! Farinelli and the King has it all but drama and interest.

Of the many, many stories that one might focus on in the life of Farinelli or King Philippe V, this seems one of the more timid. The play imagines a passion arising between the singer and the Queen though he has grown too fond of Philippe to betray him in this way. Of course Farinelli slept with men and women so surely a far

more intriguing conflict would be a genuine three-way tug of war for their loyalty and passion. We know Farinelli and the King are simpatico, but after their initial fencing match of wits, this isn't developed. Neither, really, is the source of the romance between the King and her singer.

Even the restoration of the King to his wits pales in comparison to the dramatics it created in Alan Bennett's *The Madness Of King George*. And the more one learns about the real Farinelli's life, the less the arc of this play makes sense. Why exactly the jump to his retirement in Bologna, implying an exile that didn't take place for many years? (Farinelli sang for the King's first successor as well.) Why the final aria for his tailor? Yet another private audience of one or a nod to the public that he avoided for the rest of his life? Indeed, the major scene in the forest includes a concert where the peasantry gathers round to hear Farinelli sing, a moment that feels artificial (jokes are made about the theater audience being the peasants) and in conflict with the entire thrust of Farinelli's life. If he's going to find a release singing in communion with nature, why the large audience? Is it a hint he made a poor choice or that talent like this shouldn't be hidden? Or just a gimmick that means nothing.

The play makes no real sense or drama of any of it — of music's ability to heal or the demands of art or the burdens of a king or the call of duty or a million other themes hinted at. Worse, it doesn't make you care what was intended anyway.

A crucial problem is the staging of director John Dove. Understandably they have decided to double the role of Farinelli: actor Sam Crane plays the man and Iestyn Davies does the singing alongside him during musical moments. But in a very confusing and distracting gambit, Dove has them onstage together and yet never latches onto a cohesive style of presentation. The first time they perform, Davies sings and Crane is a bit behind him, sort of mouthing the words and sort of looking uncomfortable and unhappy. At other times, Crane is mute. And then later in the play, intended to be a moving acknowledgement, they sort of briefly touch at one point and then Crane leaves the stage and Davies is still singing. It makes no sense on any literal or symbolic level and proves hugely confusing. My guest — like myself — has heard counter tenors at the operas of Philip Glass and been astounded by their voices. Here he was underwhelmed by the singing. I place less blame on Davies and more on how each piece was orchestrated, though surely wiser classical music buffs than I might question why these pieces in this way. They are too familiar when I think they should feel more utterly unusual and strange.

That said, the three leads are solid under the murky circumstances. Rylance holds our attention moment to moment, even if the King's recovery feels more mundane than magical. Grove is appealing as a resourceful woman in straitened circumstances and in perhaps the least intelligible part Crane manages an appealing, charming confusion. Farinelli is eternally uncertain here and Crane's performance captures that nicely. I don't know why the caged bird sings any more than I did before seeing this show. Crane makes me appreciate that neither, apparently, does the bird.

FAVORITE THEATER OF 2017

Notice that I say this is a list of my favorite theater of 2017. I could undoubtedly make a list of the best theater I wasn't able to see. Foolishly, I also cover film and music and books and DVDs and so on. So I sometimes miss gems Off Broadway. Worse is when I know a show should be seen and simply don't get access! Boo! It's churlish to complain when I get to see so much theater and share my enthusiasm, but on the other hand it's a little annoying to be constantly asked what I thought of the three "Bs" — Bette Midler in *Hello Dolly*, Bruce Springsteen and that demon barber *Sweeney Todd* — and have to admit I didn't get to see them. So let me share my favorite shows of 2017 followed by a list of all the shows I saw, just so you can note exactly what I was lucky enough to catch. Even on the rare occasion when a catty or withering comment springs to mind, I tend to celebrate the best work and realize even the poorest shows are put on by people who typically sacrifice a great deal just for their love of the stage. Thanks to them all.

Not included: *Wolves* and *The Band's Visit*, which both made my list in 2016 and would rightly do so again if they were debuting in 2017. I had shockingly poor luck with musicals (again, no Bruce, no Bette), sad to say.

1. Sunday In The Park With George
2. A Doll's House, Part 2
3. Jitney
4. Oslo
5. The Liar
6. Idomeneo at the Met (conducted ****sigh**** by James Levine)
7. The Children
8. The Glass Menagerie
9. Happy Days
10. The Skin Of Our Teeth
11. Pacific Overtures
12. Derren Brown: Secret

And let's not forget:

Nellie McKay's midnight shows at Joe's Pub working on a bio-musical about a trailblazing female comic we'll call Roan Jivers (for legal reasons), already knocking it out of the park even though we can't review it because she was just working out the kinks. And for good measure she beat the New York Times to the punch with a

call for a vacancy tax on empty storefronts and rent stabilization for businesses in NYC! No one like her.

Kate Hamill smartly adapting both *Vanity Fair* and *Pride and Prejudice*

The ongoing, important work done by Theater of War

The delightful, sexy Ethan Slater holding up an entire show on his spongy shoulders

Harriet Walters anchoring *The Tempest* at St. Ann's

Laura Osnes and Corey Cott damn near elevating *Bandstand* to greatness through sheer star power

The best possible production of *The Hairy Ape*, a flawed play

The happy surprise of *Desperate Measures*, the best Shakespeare musical comedy adaptation turned into a Western in ages, which turned into a honest-to-goodness hit thanks to the bustling York Theatre Company.

Cobie Smulders proving again how terrific she is in *Present Laughter*

My favorite new holiday tradition at Irish Rep: *It's A Wonderful Life* — The Live Radio Play

The terrific car accident scene from the misguided *Groundhog Day*

Kelli O'Hara in anything, Christopher Fitzgerald playing everything, Blair Brown (god bless her) adding a spark even to *The Parisian Woman* and Jay Armstrong Johnson displaying his triple threat charisma — all of them on display in the MasterVoices series at Carnegie Hall, having fun with the over-stuffed treat *Babes In Toyland* and wrapped up neatly in a bow by the words of the gifted Joe Keenan

Broadway needs more black boxes so shows like *Hadestown* don't have to jump through hoops to maintain their vision. Circle In The Square can only host so many pieces!

Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

The Liar *** 1/2

Jitney *** 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) *** 1/2

Significant Other * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) ** (third visit, but *** if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) ** 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) *** 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) ****

The Light Years * 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) *** 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips **

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) *

Come From Away *

Miss Saigon **

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba * 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s **

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) ***

Latin History For Morons * 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

War Paint **

In and Of Itself ***

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) ***

The Antipodes **

Anastasia **

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory **

Oslo *** 1/2

The Little Foxes **

Groundhog Day ** 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O’Hara at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra **

A Doll’s House, Part 2 *** 1/2

Bandstand ** 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) ***

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) **

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) ** 1/2

Rooms **

Arlington ***

All The President's Men (Public Theater one-night event at Town Hall) ** 1/2

Happy Days (w Dianne Wiest) *** 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret *** 1/2

The Whirligig * 1/2

Sojourners and Her Portmanteau **

Broadway By The Year 1997-2006 ***

The Boy Who Danced On Air ** 1/2

The Government Inspector ** 1/2

A Doll's House, Part 2 (with Julie White and Stephen McKinley Henderson) ***

Desperate Measures ***

The Honeymooners **

People, Places & Things **

M. Butterfly * 1/2

Red Roses, Green Gold no stars

Of Thee I Sing (MasterVoices concert presentation at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

The Band's Visit (Broadway) *** 1/2

Junk **

Actually **

Harry Clarke ** 1/2

Bedlam's Peter Pan * 1/2

Home For The Holidays *

Describe The Night **

Pride and Prejudice ***

The Parisian Woman *

Once On This Island **

SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical ** 1/2

It's A Wonderful Life: The Live Radio Play ***

Twelfth Night (At CSC) * 1/2 out of ****

The Children *** 1/2 out of ****

Farinelli and the King ** out of ****

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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.