

Theater: Fiona Shaw Rocks in One of the Last Shows of the Year

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Five final shows to see before the holidays take over. They ranged from a marvelous breathing-to-life of a poem more than 200 years old, a so-so take on the Scottish play, a one-man homage to a master via August Wilson's biographical piece and two new works from talented writers striving for greatness.

THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER *** 1/2
MACBETH **
HOW I LEARNED WHAT I LEARNED ***
THE (CURIOUS CASE OF THE) WATSON INTELLIGENCE ***
THE NIGHT ALIVE **

THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER *** 1/2
BAM

In 1996, Fiona Shaw performed T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* at a dilapidated theater in New York; I didn't see it and have kicked myself ever since. I even fantasized about bumping into Shaw on the street or at a party, collaring her and playfully mentioning how I have berated myself with the inevitable fantasy ending -- Shaw impulsively recites the entire piece right on the spot. Well, that hasn't happened yet but the next best thing is taking place at the Brooklyn Academy Of Music. Shaw and her longtime collaborator director Phyllida Lloyd have staged an impeccable production of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's mythic *Rime Of The Ancient Mariner*.

It's an enduring work but not one of my favorites, which is why this entertaining evening is only 3 1/2 stars and not four. They simply get everything they can out of this haunted tale of a sailor who kills an albatross, finds his ship becalmed and ultimately haunted by the souls of the many men who paid the ultimate price for his act of hubris/cruelty/indifference to a creature that loved him and brought the ship luck. It's a simple, compelling work: the sailor stops a stranger on the street and the man listens, almost hypnotized, by this strangely compelling tale that has no meaning, no explanation but stays with him. Certain lines are iconic, but what stands out here is the effortless theatricality on display.

One can't praise the technical elements enough, from the simple yet evocative stage design of Chloe Obolensky (making excellent use of sailing canvas) to the tandem work of the lighting by Jean Kalman and Mike Gunning with the composition and sound design of Mel Mercier. I don't know if I've ever seen the audience lit in a particular color (as opposed to the stage) but it was a striking effect and probably very interesting for the actors to see us bathed in red at one key point.



(Photo by Phyllida Lloyd)

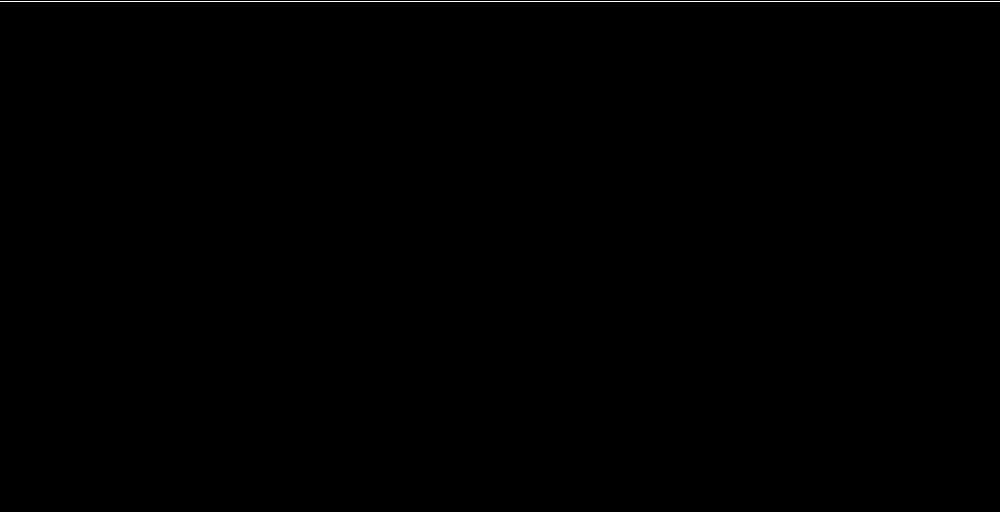
I assumed it was a one-woman show but this is very much a duo. Shaw is joined onstage by dancer and actor Daniel Hay-Gordon and he is an effective and affecting partner. Shaw performs the entire piece so at times she is the Wedding Guest who is collared by the sailor, at times the Ancient Mariner, at times the other sailors and so on. Thanks to Lloyd's flawless touch, the transitions between the two actors as they change parts (Shaw might deliver one line as the Mariner and the next as the Guest) are effortless. A long pole, a bit of sailing canvas, a crate and the stage comes alive with corpses stumbling on deck (Hay-Gordon in excellent form), men in row boats coming to see the spectacle, the Mariner cursed by his fellow sailors to carry the dead albatross around his neck and more. Hay-Gordon handles the subtle choreography by Kim Brandstrup with ease and he matches the great Shaw every step of the way without saying a word. He is an admirable (and admirably pliable) partner for this dance.

But of course Shaw commands the stage, whether roaming the theater beforehand and amusingly pulling people onstage to try on different props or suddenly bringing us to attention as the show begins with her commanding, magnetic voice. At 45 minutes, it is a full evening of theater, though I admitted to churlishly hoping for an encore of "Kubla Khan." Doing two major poems might dilute the power of either though I also fantasized about an evening that paired *Rime with The Waste Land*. But Shaw is always looking forward so here's hoping other evocative poems and narrative classics will get her to return to this genre soon. *The Canterbury Tales*? Spencer's *The Faerie Queen*? *The Odyssey*? The possibilities are endless.

MACBETH ** **LINCOLN CENTER**

You never want to walk away from a production of *Macbeth* discussing the witches and the set design, but those are the most notable elements of this well-intentioned production from director Jack O'Brien that is handsomely mounted but has yet to cohere into a convincing whole. Mind you, it seems the show is strongly improved from the early previews so check in at the end of this run and will likely be closer than ever to reflecting the skills of all involved.

Shakespeare's tale of greed for power is familiar. Macbeth is a faithful servant to the king, but the mere whisper that he deserves more pushes him to terrible deeds: he slaughters the king, orders the death of those near and dear to the monarch and causes open war to split the nation. His wife urges him along though just as quickly guilt dogs them both and their dreams of power go horribly wrong. It's a cautionary tale: murder your guests and you'll at the very least gain a fearsome reputation and few takers of your hospitality in the future.



The handsome set by Scott Pask is fluidly handled by O'Brien, who keeps things moving briskly at least. The three witches are played by men (Byron Jennings, Malcolm Gets and especially a camp John Glover). It's not a revealing take on things, but Glover does give us some playful bursts of comedy amidst the sturm und drang of the Scottish play. Anne-Marie Duff makes her Broadway debut here but we'll have to wait for better circumstances to see what she's capable of doing. We already know Hawke is a brilliant, committed stage actor who has triumphed in everything from Shakespeare to Stoppard. Their two characters are delivered clearly, sometimes effectively but never fully alive. Of course Hawke is too good not to have his moments: the scene where he's told Lady Macbeth is dead scores home simply with Hawke onstage, not saying a word, holding us rapt with his shock and grief delivered subtly and magnetically.

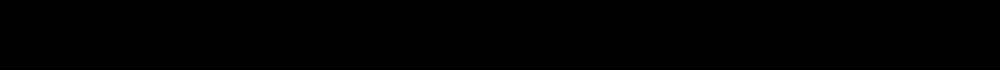
Richard Easton of course is kingly, Brian d'Arcy James a solid and stolid Banquo and Daniel Sunjata best of all as a fiery, vengeful Macduff. The sword fighting is effectively stylized for most of the show, though the imagination of fight director Steve Rankin and O'Brien falters at the death of Macbeth. All the tech elements are well done with the very notable exception of a scene with the witches where Macbeth's visions are banally depicted in full video displays that are all too literal.

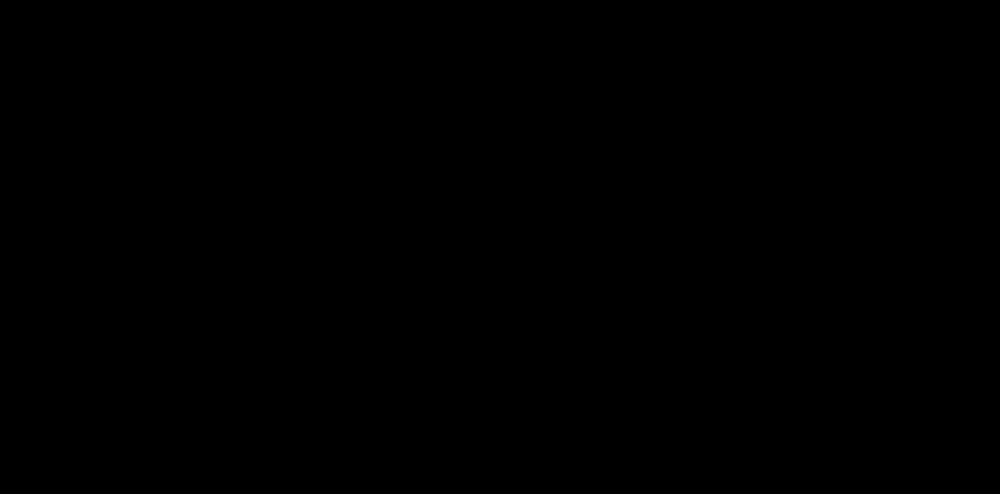
Talented artists all worked hard here; sometimes, it just doesn't come together or not soon enough as opening night looms. But the care taken extends to the effective opening right to the curtain calls (a particular fascination of mine for what it reveals about the talent involved or at least the director's handling of them). Too often, a show with a large cast exhausts an audience as it struggles to give so many people a chance to bow; even a great show can run out of steam as line after line of performers trudge to the stage, bow and then slowly make way for others. Here O'Brien has everyone move swiftly and effectively, moving in and out castmembers with the sureness of a general so that the applause need barely pause as dozens of people flew up and away so that an audience could show their support for the cast. Then in a very effective finale punctuated by the rousing music of Mark Bennett (who also did the sound), the cast melted away and Hawke and Duff had a moment alone and then she too whisked away. In a dramatic echo of the opener, the music thundered, the lights dramatically narrowed to a spotlight on Hawke, he bowed his head, one more burst of music and boom the light disappeared and he was gone. It was a welcome burst of showmanship. If the show had been a bigger creative success, that final flourish would have sent the audience into a frenzy. As it was, it allowed the audience to appreciate the attention paid to every detail.

HOW I LEARNED WHAT I LEARNED * SIGNATURE THEATRE**

August Wilson left us too soon, though he also did so with excellent dramatic instincts: he died just as he completed his cycle of ten plays, one for every decade of the 20th century. Among other works, he left this one-man autobiographical work bristling with intelligence and suffused with humor and insight on America, his own life and the African American experience.

Who better to bring this show back to life than Ruben Santiago-Hudson, the talented actor, writer and director who was inspired by Wilson, rose to great heights as an actor in those plays, pursued his own muse and is now a guiding force behind the many productions of Wilson around the country. (Last year, the most produced playwright in America was Shakespeare. Number two? August Wilson.)





This simple but effective bit of showmanship -- sort of a lecture cum memory play -- is not a great piece of theater, like so many of Wilson's works. It's a little shapeless in its structure and repetitive in its message. But anyone with even a passing interest in one of the great playwrights of the century will find much on offer, from stories of his prickly temper to brushes with death and the people in Wilson's life who recognized his talent and protected and nurtured it with a fierce identity.

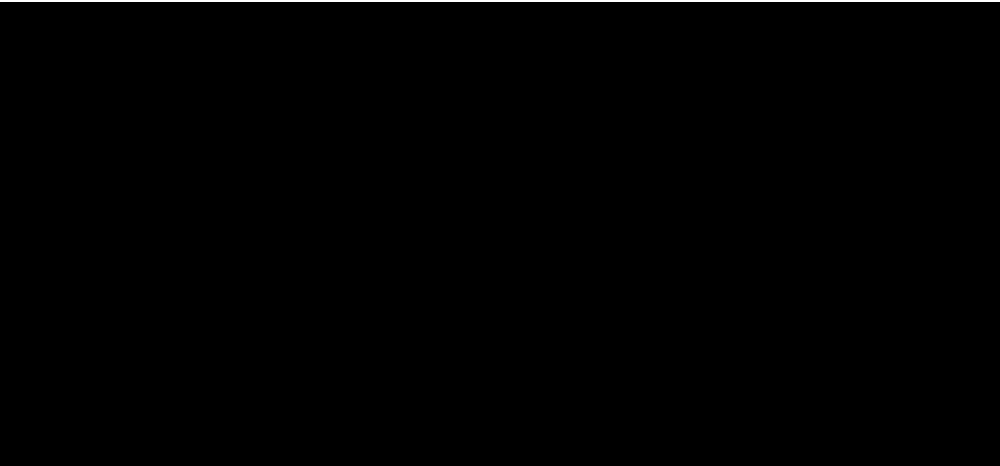
Santiago-Hudson holds the stage with ease -- our gain with him as a director is our loss with him as a full-time actor. He doesn't attempt an imitation of Wilson, but he does embody the man. If nothing else, the listing of those ten plays at the finale is enough to bring anyone to their feet. *Jitney. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. Fences. Joe Turner's Come And Gone. The Piano Lesson. Two Trains Running. Seven Guitars. King Hedley II. Gem Of The Ocean. Radio Golf.* We're just beginning to appreciate what a remarkable body of work that is. And *How I Learned What I Learned* is an enjoyable step in that journey.

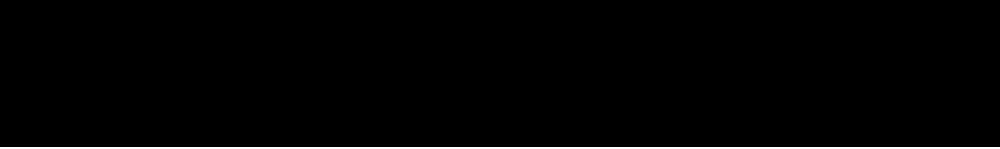
THE (CURIOUS CASE OF THE) WATSON INTELLIGENCE ***
PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZON

This world premiere of a new play by Madeleine George is wonderfully acted and has moments of such greatness that you're eager to lock the playwright in a room with her muse (or a stern dramaturg or both) and insist she not come out until she's wrestled the masterpiece that is bursting to come out of this too-long but thoroughly intriguing and inventive work.

The conceit is to track great Watsons throughout history. Watson, we come to realize, is the perfect sidekick, the ideal companion. There's the Dr. Watson who provided steadfast support to the great detective Sherlock Holmes. Don't forget Thomas Watson, the industrious associate of Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone and the man who uttered that fateful phrase, "Watson, come here! I want to see you!" And everyone remembers Watson, the IBM computer that triumphed on Jeopardy. Add to that list Watson, a dweeb who provides tech support for people with computers and like so many other Watsons proves the ideal companion.

This Watson is hired by a would-be politician who wants him to spy on the politician's ex-wife. Watson does -- albeit awkwardly (Watsons are too decent and nice to be good at subterfuge) -- and he and the ex-wife (a scientist working on her own Watson-like software program) soon fall deliriously in love.





George's play jumps back and forth in time, with the Watson of detective fame taking on the case of a woman who is suspicious of her husband to the telephone Watson being interviewed on the radio about the invention of the telephone to present-day Watson faithfully waiting for this beautiful, intelligent woman to simply accept the fact that she and this nerd are truly in love and that's okay.

Leigh Silverman directs superbly and the three actors are in excellent sync. David Costabile has the least interesting part as the suspicious politician, a maniacal Victorian inventor and so-on. But Amanda Quaid is very good as the woman in the show and has great chemistry with John Ellison Conlee as all the Watsons. They're ably aided by a simple but effective set design by Louisa Thompson that uses curtains to quickly change the setting from era to era, working hand in hand with strong costumes by Anita Yavich, good lighting by Mark Burton and great sound design by Matt Tierney that quickly and effectively lets us know where and when we are.

The play is substantially longer than it should be. (You always know more work needs to be done when the audience is unsure the play is over.) But there's great material here that can and must be shaped into a great play. For starters, the Watson conceit has run away with the show. One of the highlights is the interview scene between the Sherlock Holmes era Dr. Watson and the woman in distress. The scene crackles with humor, intimacy and charm. But it tells us everything we need to know about that Watson. The scenes where he tries to solve the case and confronts a madman who is building his own perfect mechanical companion are simply uninteresting and too nail-on-the-head. Even the opening scene -- in which the contemporary computer software genius is interacting with her software program and feeding it social cues feels Hollywood cutesy (she drinks liquor with a Twizzler in a Nora Ephron-esque twist!).

The heart of the show should be the real romance she has with the nerd, a storyline that works very well and will be even more effective when the unnecessary details are carved away. Among the many great moments include the seamless transfer where the politician giving a speech becomes the Victorian inventor/madman and a dialogue between the telephone Watson and a radio interviewer about his supportive role in the great man's endeavor and why that's not embarrassing or sad.

But when timelines start to criss-cross towards the end and people from different eras start to interact, it feels unnecessary and lazy. A lengthy final scene in which the contemporary female scientist meets with her ex and tries to offer him closure is very unsatisfying and goes against everything we know about both him and her. Ditto her needing to dump her ideal partner simply because, well...it's too good? I never did quite catch that. A little doubt before committing to him would be fine, but anymore beggars belief. And they do have the perfect ending. We see a scene where the contemporary woman realizes she loves Watson and quotes that famous bit of dialogue in a moment of self-awareness. It's good. But it's repeated a moment later and would be more effective there alone.

The telephone Watson is interviewed and gives that lovely speech about helping others achieve greatness. Then he's asked to deliver those famous first words. His response should be, "Oh no. I never delivered that line. My role is to listen. You must say the words." And then hand back the phone to the female interviewer who is now all people who need companionship and love so she can say with affecting emotion, "Watson, come here! I want you!"

What I need is to see a play that is so very full of promise take advantage of this excellent first staging and be pruned and shaped even further so it can achieve its goal of greatness. What it needs, I guess, is a theatrical Watson.

THE NIGHT ALIVE ** ATLANTIC THEATER

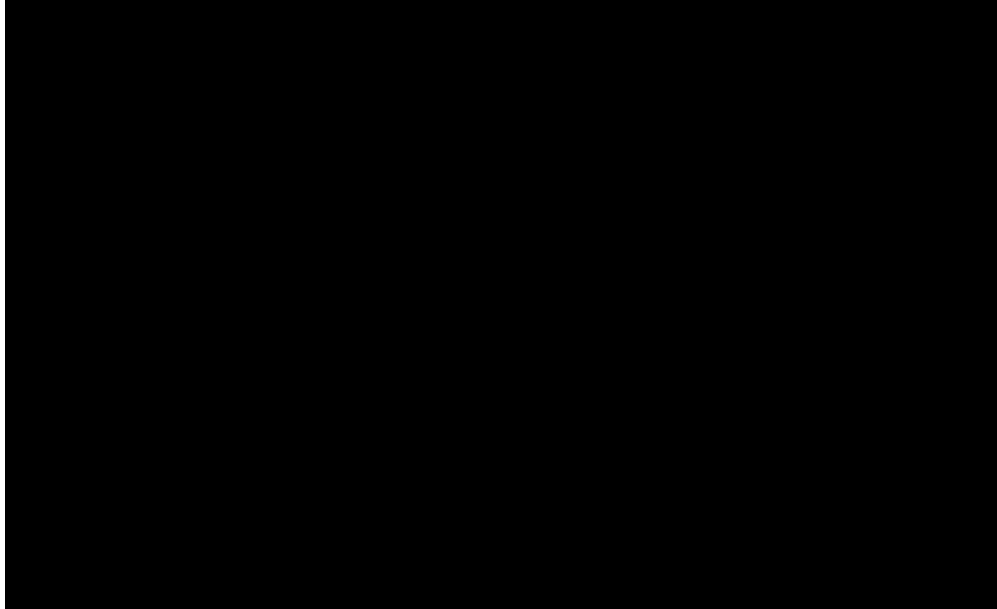
Conor McPherson is a marvelous playwright and a recent, pitch-perfect revival of *The Weir* by Irish Rep reminded me of that strongly. So I eagerly came to see the US premiere of his new work, which debuted at the Donmar in London. Unfortunately, it feels incomplete, unsure of what it wants to be or say. Is it telling that the title of the play -- *The Night Alive* -- means no more to me after seeing it than it did before? I think so. And the truism that the threat of violence is a lot scarier than actual violence is also brought home.

The storyline, such as it is, is simple. Tommy (the marvelous Ciarin Hinds in top,

shambling form) lives rather abjectly in a slatternly room of a grand house in Dublin. His mate Doc (Michael McElhatton) sneaks in through the window, hoping for a crisp or two or sharing his own when he lucks into any. A mattress on the floor and some whiskey from a bottle are the best you can hope from these two, who barely scrape by.

But one night Tommy brings home Aimee (Caoilfhionn Dunne). We soon realize she's penniless, desperate and a whore. But in Tommy's world, that still puts her a bit above his station and he can only hope for some crumbs from her table, even as he keeps a respectful distance and falls in love. Love in this case becomes a handjob for some quick money (she won't do anything else!) but that's grand and suits Tommy just fine. What does he want with all that bother?

This glimmer of intimacy in his dank world is interrupted only by the cantankerous landlord, a besotted old fool Maurice (the great Jim Norton in a forgettable role), who complains about the mess and the noise of their music when he's not fallen down drunk. He's the only interruption until Aimee's ex-boyfriend comes sniffing around, that is.



The play simply never came into focus as more than a modest character study. Then it went off the rails. When Aimee's ex-boyfriend Kenneth (Brian Gleeson) barges in, he finds the hapless, almost special needs person Doc. The highlight of the show is their tense standoff as Kenneth keeps moving in on Doc, entering his personal space, ratcheting up the tension and then backing off, picking up a hammer as a silent threat then handing it to Doc...before picking it up again. Gleeson and McElhatton are terrific here. They should have kept the violence offstage, though unfortunately it begins in full view and unconvincingly as Kenneth taps Doc on the head with a hammer but then really goes to town when they disappear from view into a bathroom.

SPOILER ALERT

That looming violence and the beat-down of Doc gives a jolt of immediacy to the play. Sadly, it's followed by an even harder to swallow showdown where Tommy and Aimee face off with Kenneth in a triangle and a violent struggle leads to a dead Kenneth. This feels like a complete diversion from the central question of whether Aimee really wants Tommy the way he wants her. They spend a lot of time disposing of the body, with Tommy spinning an elaborate scheme to run away together. It's perfectly believable when Aimee begs off and disappears. But in not one but two very hard to swallow twists, the landlord Maurice suddenly decides to bequeath his home to Tommy so Tommy and Doc have a home to live in forever. And at the last moment, a cleaned-up and sweet looking Aimee returns to display her true love for Tommy.

END OF SPOILER ALERT

These twists are thoroughly unconvincing and undercut the little we know about these characters. There's a slight hint that heaven will be like life but with everything going your way. So perhaps Tommy is dead? I really don't think that's the intent but it's hard to make sense of the goings-on. I love Jim Norton's work so perhaps my confusion over his part (I thought he was the lead) made me especially disappointed in that role as written. Maurice the landlord is almost a different person every time he returns to the stage: complaining landlord, pathetic drunk, wealthy and superior man of means/deus ex machina I think about covers it. None of them come to life, despite

Norton's best efforts.

Who is Doc? There's a suggestion he might be gay (though again, I don't think that's really intended) and a hand he places intimately on Tommy's shoulder suggests it as well, though he's practically mentally challenged at times, or perhaps that's just sweetness confused with stupidity. Aimee is the least defined of all, a gauzy idea of a fallen woman who may or may not have a heart of gold. Only Tommy truly comes to life: desperate, forceful, fighting, striving, needy but willing to help others in need as well. Hinds does his best and when the writer Conor McPherson lets his play down, the director Conor McPherson is smart enough to cast great talent like Hinds and let them do their all.

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
After Midnight ***
La Soiree ***
Nothing To Hide ** 1/2
The Patron Saint Of Sea Monsters **
Die Frau Ohne Schatten/The Woman Without A Shadow at the Met ***
Little Miss Sunshine **
Souvenir ** 1/2
A Gentleman's Guide To Love & Murder *** 1/2
Twelfth Night *** 1/2
King Richard The Third ***
Lies My Father Told Me **
Regular Singing **
And Away We Go **
Analog.ue at St. Ann's Warehouse ** 1/2
Oliver! at Papermill **
Waiting For Godot ** 1/2
No Man's Land ***
The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner *** 1/2
Macbeth w Ethan Hawke **
How I Learned What I Learned ***
The Curious Case Of The Watson Intelligence ***
The Night Alive **

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category. He's also the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's *available* for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his *website* and his *daily blog*. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also *available* for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and *gain* access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

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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