

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Theater: *Forever Tango* Is Back; *Monkey King* Looks to the West; *The Civilians* Face Death

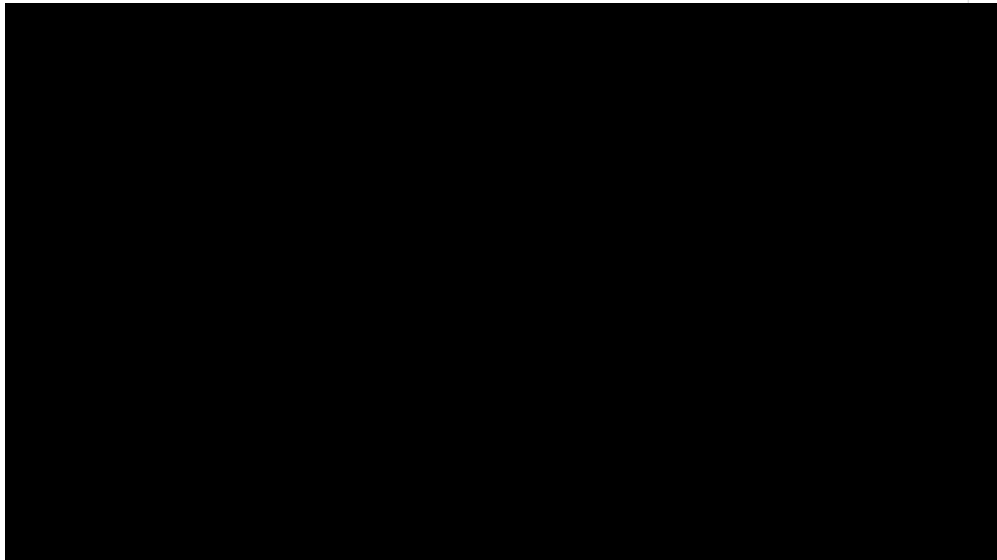
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FOREVER TANGO *** out of ******MONKEY: JOURNEY TO THE WEST** ** 1/2 out of ******THE CIVILIANS: BE THE DEATH OF ME** *** out of ******FOREVER TANGO** *** out of ******WALTER KERR THEATRE**

They came for the tango and stayed for the salsa. The blockbuster hit dance show *Forever Tango* returned to Broadway for the second time since its debut in 1997. And while the dancing was often terrific, it was just as thrilling to see Gilberto Santa Rosa -- the Gentleman of Salsa -- deliver a few classic tunes with aplomb. Like all great performers, Rosa draws your eyes to him even when he's seemingly doing nothing, just as the best dancers in the show smoldered with intensity even when they seemed to be studiously ignoring their partner. Rosa performed three solo numbers and ended each act singing as the entire troupe danced on stage. He held your attention so effortlessly that when he began to exit in the wrong direction, stopped and went back the other way, well even that was done with such style and elan you wanted to applaud. (Rosa is here for a limited time. Luis Enrique joins it July 30 through August 18.)

Between Rosa and the 11 man orchestra led by the imperious Victor Lavallen on the bandoneon (an accordion-like concertina), the music was enough to provide an evening of fun. Indeed, when you see four distinguished elderly gentlemen brandishing bandoneons you feel fairly certain they're going to prove masters of their instruments and you're in for a fun time.

But of course the tango held center stage and you sampled all types, from the splashily costumed acts that opened and closed the show (coming up out of a giant bandoneon prop) to more traditionally garbed dancers to comic relief and even the guest stars Karina Smirnoff and Maksim Chmerkovskiy from *Dancing With The Stars*. I never saw the earlier incarnations of *Forever Tango* but with the current acts it's in fine shape.



An early tango told the story of a pimp and his dancers interacting uneasily with some young toughs. Six teams performed but it felt a little sloppy, though Aldana Silveyra deftly created a bored, indifferent character that was amusing. The lack of synchronicity and detail proved to be a rare misstep for the generally on point show.

It was followed by an orchestral piece, another dance number and then the first appearance of Gilberto Santa Rosa, which drew roars of approval from the Latino and Hispanic audience members. By his exit after singing "Garua," everyone was applauding. And that set the tone for the show: group numbers and solo pieces punctuated by musical interludes from the orchestra or Rosa. Each act ended with a free for all involving just about everyone on stage, though that proved problematic for one reason. While you couldn't help wishing for more songs by Rosa, it was a solidly paced evening that demonstrated why this showcase has toured the world.

Of course, you can't help having favorites and some you find less appealing. "Zumo" Leguizamon and Belen Bartolome were technically dazzling but I found their pieces lacked passion. They confused speed and technical skill with intensity... or perhaps I was just distracted by Bartolome's signature hair dye, which involves a very distracting and goofy blonde wave amidst his dark hair. Despite my reservations, they certainly offered a high-wire thrill.

Sebastian Ripoll and Mariana Bojanich however focused on every little detail, the heart of tango. In their first number "La Mariposa," you could see their intense focus, how even the fingering of his arm along her spine and her arm around his was exact and precise, revealing an artistic nuance even as they twirled and dipped and glided with increasing intensity across the stage. They were the first pure example of tango at its best.

Aldana Silveyra and Diego Ortega weren't quite at that level (and her wild, flowing straight hair seemed like a third wheel on a date -- getting in Ortega's face and otherwise drawing attention away from their dancing) but they had their moments. Florencia Blanco and the handsome Hernan Lazart seemed the youngest team of them all, at least in years. They had everything but the presence that will come with age and experience, but her Almodovar-esque beauty and his reserve will serve them well. It would be exciting to see them five or ten years from now.

Comic relief was provided by Natalia Turelli and Ariel Manzanaras. Their first and best piece involved Manzanaras taking photos and trying to hide the camera from Turelli while they tangoed. Their second piece was almost as good. In both, Manzanaras was suitably clownish. But like Ginger Rogers, you couldn't help admiring Turelli, who displayed comic brio and sexy appeal all while playing the straight one to his outlandish behavior. She was a delight.

But my favorite couple was Mariana Bojanich and Sebastian Ripoll. They delivered everything one hoped for: intensity, emotional heat, precise attention to every detail and superlative skills. All of it came with the presence and magnetic appeal that can make the tango blossom from a studied ritual into art. Ripoll in particular was the center of attention no matter how many other people were on stage.

Then there were the special guest stars Karina and Maksim from *Dancing With The Stars*. Their first act solo number "Comme I'll Faut" stood out in sharp contrast to the other acts and not in a good way. They were technically solid but the entire number felt more like athletics or feats of strength as they bounded across the stage. While even the weakest other acts were dancing and at least trying to create characters and an emotional heat, their piece felt like a gymnastic display. Still, thanks to their TV fame, they received the biggest applause of the night.

Their second act number was better, though they were accompanied I believe by a backing track instead of the orchestra, with only the cellist Luis Bravo (who created and directed *Forever Tango*) as live accompaniment. By and large, the second act increased the tempo, with more numbers involving more intense dancing and even passionate kisses. In that environment, Karina and Maksim seemed less out of place, especially since their second

number was far quieter and tamped down their more flashy impulses.

But it was the finales at the end of each act that undid them for good. Seeing Karina and Maksim on stage next to the rest of the company drove home how inappropriate and lacking in style and soul their tangos actually are. With Rosa singing and almost everyone else paired off as couples, Karina and Maksim twisted and shimmied across the stage, ignoring each other and playing to the crowd in cheesy cruise line fashion -- a mockery of the studied nonchalance that makes tango so sexy and appealing. It was literally embarrassing to watch them shake their booties with no clue how foolish and absurd they looked next to the true artists on stage around them. They may be insurance to help the show sell tickets more than 16 years after this franchise launched, but examples of the art they are not.

Nonetheless, their presence was a small flaw in an otherwise solid show filled with enough great examples of singing, musicianship and of course dancing to make anyone believe that in fact it could tour forever. Now if only someone would take a page from Bravo's book and do the same for flamenco. (Just watch Carlos Saura's brilliant concert film *Flamenco* from 1995 to see how it should be done.)

MONKEY: JOURNEY TO THE WEST ** 1/2 out of ****

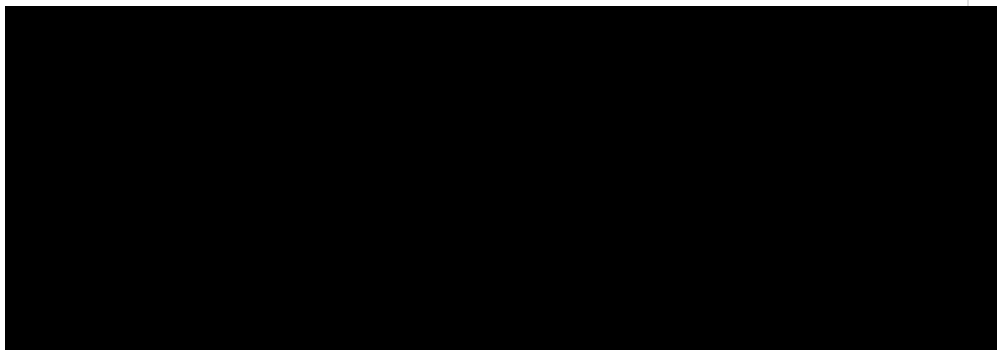
LINCOLN CENTER FESTIVAL

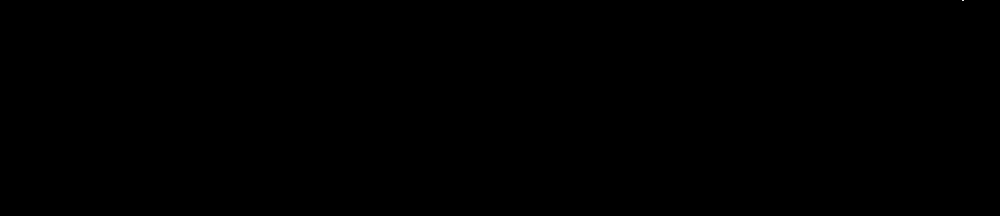
Journey To The West isn't just a story familiar to everyone in China and throughout Asia. This comic, spiritual and adventurous classic is as essential to China's identity as say the tales of King Arthur and Robin Hood are to the British. Written in the 1500s, it tells the tale of a monk traveling to Tibet for wisdom who is helped on his journey by the ribald Monkey King and other companions. It has been told and retold in literally every fashion possible, from a recent blockbuster film that's among the highest grossing Chinese language movies in history to dance and puppetry and comic books and TV shows and you name it.

So it was fun to finally see this version, my first exposure to *Journey To The West* other than reading part of a recent, acceptable (if not poetic and memorable) translation. (I didn't finish yet, since it runs to some two thousand pages. Anthony Yu's translation is the one I read; earlier ones should be avoided like the plague.)

It would be even more fun to say this production by director Chen Shi-Zheng was a triumph. It does involve a satisfying collaboration with key figures behind the rock band Gorillaz, with Damon Albarn of Blur composing the excellent music (the show's strongest element) and Jamie Hewlett contributing the visual concept, animation and costumes. The result is nine scenes encapsulating the broad brush strokes of the tale, combining animated sequences for moments like the birth of the Monkey King with Chinese acrobatics, fight sequences and clowning.

You get a broad sense of this timeless adventure, a pretty good idea of the street performances and circus acts that Chinese people enjoyed throughout history and some strong music that draws mostly upon Chinese elements without sacrificing Albarn's gift for pop melody. What you don't get is emotional involvement or any dramatic unity that might turn these individual set pieces into an evening of genuine theater.






Among the many trials the monk Tripitaka (Li Li) and his friends must face, the most memorable is Princess Iron Fan (Chen Jiaojiao). An active volcano blocks their path and only her Iron Fan can clear the way. Monkey (Wang Lu, who grew on me and shares the demanding role with others) challenges her with impunity and ultimately we get the most elaborate and effective action sequence of the show. The wire work and Jiaojiao's formidable presence at this climactic scene hint at what might have been. (Not to mention hinting at what the long-bruited stage production of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* would be like.) When Monkey taunts her, Albarn underlines his snarky, taunting demeanor by scoring his dialogue with a wickedly catchy melody that puts a deserved swagger in his step. Here every element of the show works together.

Too often, however, the scenes were static set pieces. The Spider Woman section began with a pretty effect of aerialists twirling up and down bolts of cloth. But that initially beautiful image remained essentially the same and the scene never developed or grew visually or emotionally. Seeing Monkey trapped in Buddha's great palm was an amusing turn, but the visual effect was strong enough to make other scenes seem sparse. A brief misstep during one acrobatic sequence reminded you how difficult the many stunts on display truly were, but the omnipresence of Cirque du Soleil has trained us to not be wowed by such exotic feats on their own. They must be presented with special flair or embedded in an emotional context for their power to really come out and that was lacking here. Though it must be said the troupe of women twirling plates at the finale was truly impressive.

In all, you sort of learn what the story of *Journey To The West* is about without ever being actually caught up in it. Anyone looking for a glimpse into China's rich tradition of circus acts, wuxia martial arts and other elements of Chinese pop culture would find this a decent sort of Cliff Notes. The circus acts were solid though here they consciously chose a more loose presentation, rather than say the precision of the Olympic Opening Ceremony in Beijing that so captivated the world. Albarn's music proved he can be a success in almost any genre. But while you can see how *The Wizard Of Oz* and so many other myths draw upon it (or more specifically the primal tales it too draws upon), *Monkey: Journey To The West* soon fades from memory. Westerners must still wait for the ideal introduction to this classic Chinese tale.

Since the best part of the show is the music, here's a video interview with Jamie Hewlett and Damon Albarn of Gorillaz on their contributions.



THE CIVILIANS: BE THE DEATH OF ME * out of ****
IRONDALE CENTER**

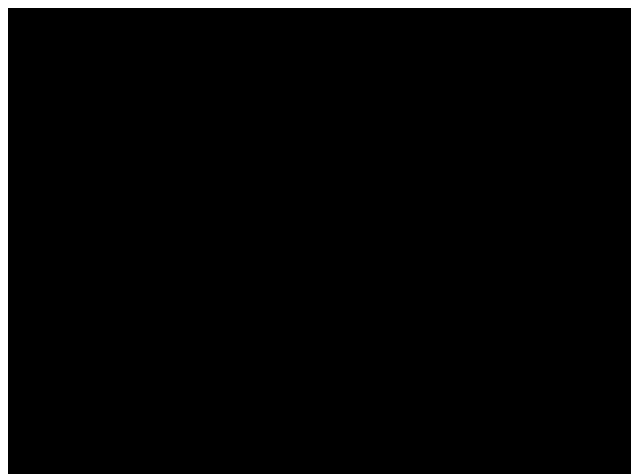
Whatever The Civilians theater troupe is doing, you don't want to miss. Whether it's a staged reading at Joe's Pub, an early staging of a new work (as I believe *Be The Death Of Me* to be) or a completed piece in its final form, they're simply one of the most interesting companies around.

The Civilians specialize in using found material and doing interviews with real people to create their works. In this case, it's a piece about death. It was staged at the Irondale Center for two performances only so you'll have to wait to see it again. But whenever and wherever they do it or anything else, jump.

The staging of the show made great use of the Irondale space, which includes a large balcony space overlooking a big floor. Throughout the building audience members found stations: a number of them on the main floor, one or two in rooms off that space, one on the stairs and more on the balcony that goes around three quarters of the room. You're encouraged to go to any station, where an actor is waiting (or at a few spots, just CD players with taped interviews) and listen to their story. You can go in any order you like to any station and given the time constraints you're guaranteed NOT to be able to hear every single story. So everyone's experience of the show is different. A buzzer sounds to let you know when it's time to move on to the next station,

In practice, this was amusingly cacophonous. Five or six or eight audience members might gather at a particular station, all of them scattered throughout the space. Then the buzzer sounds and the actors launch into their monologues, all drawn from more than 100 interviews with real people around death, such as embalmers, cancer survivors, ambulance drivers, those who attempted suicide, the parent who lost a child and so on. But the initial jolt comes from suddenly hearing three dozen actors launch into their tales. It's a babble of noise about something people often avoid talking about and each and every audience member abruptly and unconsciously leans in to hear. The noise around the room is so loud -- people laughing, joking, crying, yelling, sharing about death -- that it's hard to hear and you must get intimately close to the actor at your station in order to hear better. It must be great fun to watch the audience during that initial start to the show.

Even when your actor is done, you're asked to remain in place. You can hear the other monologues coming to a close until the final one stops and there's a moment of silence and the buzzer sounds and you're off to a new story.



Needless to say, certain actors and stories resonated more strongly than others. But the kaleidoscope experience of the evening was great fun (yes, fun!) and the journey home undoubtedly included stories of death for the other audience members as it did for me and my guest.

While much of the evening is random, a certain structure imposes itself about halfway through. I was lucky enough to be on the balcony and stay there, even though people were encouraged to head down to the main floor. That meant I had a perfect view when for the first time everyone quietly listened to the same story. An actor was in a pool of light, sitting on the floor in front of a microphone, telling her tale. In a wide circle, sitting on the floor then behind them on chairs and finally against the walls, hundreds of people were shadowed in darkness, quietly sharing this moment. It was followed by another story in another area on the floor until I was now firmly told to head downstairs. Then more stations appeared again as people hurried to check out the stories they hadn't heard yet. And that was followed by actors speaking from the balcony down to the crowd below. A woman sharing the tale of her baby dying and finding out where the mass graves for babies can be found in New York City was especially wrenching.

Towards the end, I didn't quite like the arc they imposed on the show. One monologue involved a woman with an aggressively large personality. The actor was surely capturing the rhythms of this woman but it came across as more stand-up than story and -- combined with the woman's New Age sensibility -- didn't work for me at all. I didn't like the performance or find the story interesting, though the audience gave it some of the warmest applause of the night, perhaps relieved to be laughing again. That was followed by one of the best performances and stories, involving a woman who is a journalist and travels the globe. But then the final story, about a man dying at sea and then coming back hit on New Age themes again, too soon to the stand-up schtick of the woman two stories earlier. It felt a little repetitive and his story simply wasn't as interesting as so many others.

The Civilians will surely find a stronger arc to the end of the evening as this piece takes shape for future productions. And I'll be eager to see it again when it comes back to New York, catch some of the stories I missed and appreciate more fully the actors and craft involved in putting it on. Unquestionably, *Be The Death Of Me* will have a long life.

Check out their website for more info on the group. You can also sign up for their free podcasts. Go to their blog for updates and latest info on shows.

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 ***

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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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