

Theater: 'Fortress Of Solitude' Soars At The Public

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THE FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE *** 1/2 out of ****
THE PUBLIC THEATER

Musicals cover every topic under the sun: rebellion, forbidden love, politics, passion, war, peace, family, despair, death and of course love in all its forms. But friendship -- that enduring aspect of our lives (especially in a world where marriages come and go) -- friendship is not often at the heart of a show. It is the sweet center and driving force in *The Fortress Of Solitude*, a new musical at the Public based on the novel by Jonathan Lethem.

Friendship is the entire story of the first act, where Dylan (Adam Chanler-Berat), the rare white kid growing up in Brooklyn in the late 1970s, is rescued and befriended by Mingus (Kyle Beltran). This is a show with a lot going on, thanks to a rich and satisfying book by Itamar Moses. They cover race (of course) and the changing times and gentrification and music, always music, from the complex choral work that dominates many key moments to the convincing dives into pop, soul, rap and punk.

Yes, the story drifts into too familiar territory -- with the more privileged white boy becoming a rock critic and the less privileged black kid slipping inexorably into dark times -- and yes these good friends drift apart, which just isn't fun. But ain't that life? The show is shaggy and a little awkward as it crams in everything it wants from the joys of listening to music and breaking down one particular song to comic books to tagging to escaping bullies to girls. That's part of the particular charm of this show. This is no polished, tourist-eyeing product. It's an original, fresh and fascinating work and one of the best musicals of the year. It isn't perfect and I'd love to see it again.

I can't speak to the novel, which I haven't read, but doubtless the show captures its spirit because there's so much of that on tap here. The uniformly excellent cast brings characters large and small to life, from the girls on the block who skip rope and provide running commentary to record producers, back-up singers, and countless others. Eighteen actors are listed but they seem like many more.

It begins with Dylan moving into Brooklyn at the behest of his mom Rachel (Kristen Sieh). She wants to make a statement and be part of change, all those liberal Seventies aspirations, right down to her bell-bottoms. She also takes off, leaving her family behind for good. Sieh has a small role, but thanks to the excellent costumes of Jessica Pabst we immediately buy her as the sort of person who would take off and indulge herself at the expense of her son. Sieh is the sole weak voice in the show, but her character leaves a convincing void in Dylan's life.

That lost boy gets by as well as he can, trying to avoid the local bully Robert (an excellent Brian Tyree Henry). When he's not asking his somewhat hapless painter father Abraham (Ken Barnett) if when mom is coming home, Dylan is listening to the albums she left behind, especially a now obscure soul artist named Barrett Rude Junior (Kevin Mambo, impressively broken down).

Lo and behold, when Dylan is taken under the wing of another kid who doesn't like to see him pushed around, it's Mingus Rude (a haunting and winning Kyle Beltran). They become friends thanks to Dylan's persistence and soon enough they're talking comic books, hanging out all the time and becoming bolder and bolder about the graffiti tags Mingus is leaving on subway cars.

Okay, maybe I love the show because its central character is a freelance writer, a rock critic to be exact. But the

first act truly soars as it captures the growing friendship of these two kids. Chanler-Berat was such a charmer in Peter And The Starcatcher. Here he captures the mildly geeky but endearing Dylan with quiet charisma to spare, proving himself a star, the best nerdy sex symbol since Anthony Rapp in Rent.

Barnett matches him moment to moment as the more complicated and conflicted Mingus. He's got a dad sinking into despair and drugs, a granddad who gets out of prison and immediately starts hounding the local teenage girls when he's not preaching hellfire (a commanding Andre De Shields with equally commanding hair) and not a lot to look forward to at school.

So many elements work beautifully in this first act, with every technical element doing their best as the show segues seamlessly from urban grit to a flashback of Barrett Rude Junior in his heyday (complete with a song that does indeed sound like a lost soul nugget) and always the sense of a community surrounding all of this. Scan the credits: every single artist involved is working in top form, right down to the orchestrations of John Clancy and additional orchestrations of Matt Beck that capture so many styles of music, often in the same elaborate sequence. (Kudos to the sound design of Robert Kaplowitz working overtime as well.)

But you don't remember dazzle; you remember the characters, the way Dylan is quietly singing along to a song by Mingus's dad and how it touches and amuses his friend, how Mingus is perplexed by Dylan putting all of his comic books into plastic sleeves, the passion when Dylan breaks down a soul classic during a lecture, the unself-conscious way they hold hands when "soaring" above the city as superheroes, tagging subway cars and wearing capes.

Of course, it ends, as childhood always does. Dylan and Mingus drift apart, starting with Dylan's chance to switch to a better school. Act Two is less enjoyable as the link between these two vivid characters begins to fray and they are essentially apart. But the music is always there throughout the show, from Robert's convincing rap to the spot-on mimicking of the Ramones on "High High High School" to shout-outs to almost every genre you can name that flourished in that era.

The signature style of the music and lyrics of Michael Friedman is not that effective and engaging display of chameleon-like ability. It's the choral moments, the songs where one character is singing one song and another character is singing another and they overlap and come together, sometimes seamlessly, sometimes discordantly, but always with purpose and style.

This is a complex and rich show directed with style by Daniel Aukin and choreographed with grace by Camille A. Brown. Sometimes, one viewing of a movie or one reading of a book or certainly one listen to an album just isn't enough to appreciate it fully. (Just ask Dylan!) I look forward to the recording of a cast album so I can take it in again and again.

In 2012, I saw [the musical Giant at the Public](#) and that big, bold, hugely appealing show should have jumped immediately to Broadway. It's distressing to say the least that a work like that which "belonged" on Broadway hasn't gone there yet. The Fortress Of Solitude is funkier, baggier, goofier, stranger and just as impressive. I don't know its commercial fate and what life it's going to have after this run. But I know its artistic fate: The Fortress Of Solitude will flourish.

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