

## Theater: Gem-like *Passion*, Charming *Carousel* and Vanessa Redgrave in *The Revisionist*

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**PASSION** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**CAROUSEL AT LINCOLN CENTER** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**THE REVISIONIST** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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**CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY**

Revisit a classic and you're sure to discover new facets. That's certainly the case with this gem-like production by Classic Stage Company. Its intimate space is ideal for shining a light on Stephen Sondheim's 1994 masterpiece *Passion* and John Doyle -- who directed and designed this impeccable revival -- has made the most of it.

It begins with sex and ends with love. In the beginning, the handsome soldier Giorgio (Ryan Silverman) and gorgeous Clara (a beguiling Melissa Errico) are making rapturous, passionate love. They are young. They are beautiful. They are in love. It's enough to make you hate them. But since this is the very first scene, even newcomers to the show will realize that this happiness isn't going to last and take some cold comfort in that. Indeed, Giorgio confesses he has been transferred to a barren outpost. But they'll write each other constantly and reunite soon, very soon!

At his new home, Giorgio meets a boisterous friendly group of soldiers making the most of their isolation, a quiet existence punctuated by the painful cries of the cousin of his commanding officer Colonel Ricci (Stephen Bogardus). That cousin is Fosca (Judy Kuhn), a terminally or perhaps perennially ill patient of Dr. Tambourri (Tom Nelis). Fosca quite naturally is drawn to this strikingly good looking and yet sensitive man (he reads!) and her polite interest soon turns to passion, a passion encouraged by the well-meaning doctor who places Giorgio in her path at key moments.

Fosca is grey-ish in pallor but strong in a way, tempered by her life of suffering. Her desire, no her *need* for Giorgio is embarrassing, clinging, demanding, unyielding, unceasing and he is driven almost mad by her servile manner. She would surely sit at his feet like a dog if it would please Giorgio because she loves him and only wants to make him happy. Her love is so complete that Fosca never expects him to love her in return. Her? How could he, she wonders. It is enough to love *him*

Fosca dominates Giorgio's thoughts and even the letters to his lover Clara, who is increasingly distraught about the hold this creature has on his affections. Giorgio tries to get away; Fosca follows. He is repulsed by her humiliating abasement but he can't stop thinking about her until finally, somehow, his intense involvement moves ever so slowly from annoyance to... admiration. And then, somehow, impossibly, to love.

This is a chamber opera, with all the heightened emotions and quiet intensity that implies. The book by James Lapine is air-tight but complex and the melodies and lyrics by Sondheim are as slippery and dangerous as mercury. "Loving you is not a choice/ It's who I am" is perhaps the most quoted line. The first time I saw the show, that line was a plaintive plea by Donna Murphy in a coruscating performance that dominated everyone around her on opening night. Fosca was a force of nature, tragic and dark but pitifully wonderful as well. Everyone stood in her shadow.

When I was lucky enough to see the show again shortly before it closed, the cast had gelled remarkably. Murphy was as memorable as ever, but the other performers had found their characters and the show had a better balance. It wasn't just Fosca and Giorgio with the distracting bauble of Clara off to the side. That second time the Doctor loomed larger and Clara wasn't so easily dismissed. But it was still a tragedy.

Now with this new production, *Passion* seems to me more beautiful than sad. Errico humanizes the sometimes flippant Clara; her desire to stay in her marriage until her son is grown seems quite reasonable. Can't Giorgio wait? But Giorgio has now seen a love where no obstacles are allowed, where no convention or societal demands could stand a chance. Suddenly this isn't the tragic story of a sickly woman clinging to a man and rousing his pity/love. It's the story of a woman pure of desire who intentionally but not cruelly wins the affections of another for the first time in her life (even her cousin considers her utterly undesirable). And in doing so, she reveals to Giorgio that he is capable of being loved completely (just like her) and that allows him to love purely, gently, passionately even though doing so may cost the physically fragile Fosca her life. It's not a dark tale, it's a romance.

Of course, it's also wish fulfillment of a sort: what lonely person longing for beauty wouldn't love to believe that they could win the prince simply with the unrelenting force of their desire? That perhaps is why a subtle mist descends on the stage at the magical moment when Fosca and Giorgio discover mutual love. It's just one small touch in a breath-taking production. The costumes by Ann Hould-Ward are not costumes, but perfectly apt clothing, from the beautiful but not vain clothes of Clara to the simple, austere material of Fosca. Kudos also to the makeup design of Angelina Avallone which marks Fosca as the walking dead without romanticizing or overdoing it. The lighting by Jane Cox and sound design by Dan Moses Schreier mesh seamlessly to set the tone and setting for everything from a ruined castle to the dining hall of soldiers, from a rattling train to a private boudoir.

The musicians located on a balcony above the audience are led beautifully by Rob Berman, performing the orchestrations by Jonathan Tunick. Doyle's direction, needless to say, is elegant and precise. And the cast is in strong voice throughout. Bogardus makes the cousin Colonel Ricci come alive. And Nelis finds just the right note for the Doctor. They are not afterthoughts in a love triangle but vital players. A flashback "explaining" Fosca's nature by revealing an early betrayal by a cad seems unnecessary here, though it's quite well played. Surely being homely and an invalid is all the explanation we desire for her neediness?

Errico, as I've said, makes Clara a worthy attention of her lover. Silverman I feared might not be worthy of her. He's handsome but it seemed at first a rather mannequin-like handsomeness. But Silverman reveals depths of Giorgio. He's almost afraid of intimacy with anyone, not just Fosca, though her almost mythic desire would scare anyone at first.

Mostly it's embarrassment and a fear of being known that drives Giorgio. At one or two moments, his revulsion at Fosca was perhaps not quite right, brief flashes that felt overdone in this intimate space. I wouldn't even call them wrong notes since they flitted by so quickly. I was more convinced that this Giorgio might in fact not think himself as terribly lovable or interesting either, a vulnerability that was winning. Overall, Silverman shines in the part, showing his equal role in the seduction that Fosca enacts. It's the role of a lifetime for this actor and he makes the most of it.

Indeed, the marvelous Judy Kuhn as Fosca is not some spider laying a web for Giorgio. She is knowing and implacable, but genuine. The humor that courses through the show is very welcome. When Giorgio admits his lover is married, Kuhn garners knowing laughs with a simple but loaded, "Oh" in response. It's a pleasure to see her wear down Giorgio when he comes to her bedchamber. Please, sit next to me. Please, rest your legs on the bed. Please, write me a letter of devotion. Please, do you have sisters? Do you kiss them goodnight? It's a dance she is initiating but a dance takes a partner and Giorgio knows as well as Fosca what is happening.

That makes their final coming together all the more beautiful. He hasn't been trapped or worn down; he has been lifted up to experience real love for the first time. The combination of book and song is so seamless, I wouldn't be surprised if you told me the entire show was sung through or if the music was only in my head.

Repeatedly, Classic Stage Company delivers shows that deserve to run much longer and transfer to bigger houses. I'm still devastated I didn't get a second chance to see *The School For Lies* and *Three Sisters* and other recent triumphs. It's impractical but I could only wish this production would stay right where it is in this ideal location. Perhaps Circle In The Square might be the small, unusual Broadway house that could serve this *Passion* well. But when a jewel finds the perfect setting, you know it.

**CAROUSEL AT LINCOLN CENTER** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC AT AVERY FISHER HALL**

It's been almost 20 years, but the 1994 revival of *Carousel* at Lincoln Center still looms large in the imagination. It was revelatory enough to convince Time magazine to name *Carousel* the greatest musical of the 20th century. Maybe 200 yards from that landmark production, the New York Philharmonic is celebrating the show with a charming concert performance of *Carousel* that proves its enduring worth.

Sometimes, concert performances prove an excuse for stunt casting that would never fly in a full-blown production. But here the Philharmonic and director John Rando (with Binder Casting) have done exactly what you should do: use the opportunity of a concert performance to cast ideal people who otherwise would never be available. So we get two stars from the world of opera, two principal dancers from the New York City Ballet, major talent like John Cullum and Kate Burton and Shuler Hensley in smaller roles and best of all the Philharmonic at full force.

No Broadway house could dream of an orchestra so big and talented; the music they create led by conductor and music director Rob Fisher is a joy. Though *Carousel* famously did not begin with an overture, that doesn't stop them here from delivering the goods with "Carousel Waltz." For the music alone, this night was a pleasure.

Kelli O'Hara was on loan from *Nice Work If You Can Get It* and it will surprise no one that she was excellent as Julie Jordan. Her voice opened up to operatic heights when paired with Nathan Gunn as Billy Bigelow and he -- unlike most opera stars of the past -- found the right voice for delivering the show tunes *Carousel* is filled with. Their scene at night as they fell in love while insisting they weren't in "If I Loved You" is of course one of musical theater's most disarmingly complex moments and they were ideal.

While O'Hara captured the strong Jordan with ease, it has to be said that Gunn didn't remotely begin to plumb the dark soul of Billy Bigelow. That wasn't a problem when falling in love or voicing the concerns of a father. (His "Soliloquy" was a highlight of the

night and Gunn's best moment.) But the sense of danger and perhaps menace that should envelope Billy was never there. This wasn't a fatal problem: Billy as played by Gunn is an essentially nice lug who doesn't realize he has other options. You can't imagine him actually beating Julie; at most, he seems to be pushing her away. That makes the brief scene in which Julie explains why she stayed with a man who beat her also a tad more palatable. Overall, Gunn was good, with the missing dark colors balanced by his immense appeal. Not good casting for a full revival but he worked in this context.

In contrast, mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe was marvelous as Nettie, the force of nature at the center of this New England town where an orphaned girl like Julie could fall for a carnival barker like Billy and see her life tinged with tragedy for doing so. Blythe belted out "June Is Bustin' Out All Over" with aplomb, joined by the rousing ensemble that was cast well down to the smallest part. She was equally at home with the humor of "A Real Nice Clambake" and of course the stirring "You'll Never Walk Alone."

I still think of Carrie as the Audra McDonald part and always will but Jessie Mueller proved anew why it's such a scene-stealing role. (It helps to be paired with Jason Danieley's witty Mr. Snow.) The other big moment is the ballet in act two that so brilliantly shows history repeating itself with the romance of Julie and Billy's daughter with another carny. Tiler Peck was breathtaking as Louise, flying across the stage in such rapture you wished briefly that the entire orchestra could be whisked away for a moment so she'd have more room to soar. Robert Fairchild was unfortunately not the right choice for chemistry. His costume including a leather vest was ill-fitting and more dancer-ish than sexy (the only off note in the otherwise excellent work of David C. Woolard). Fairchild seemed a little too stiff, a little too formal and that kept the sparks from flying between these two. He was more convincing at shrugging her off at the end. Don't get me wrong: this was merely the difference between a duet being good and being great but there's no question he was outshone here.

Of the Big Five of Rodgers & Hammerstein -- *Oklahoma* (probably the proper choice for the most influential musical of the 20th century), *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King & I* and *The Sound Of Music* - *Carousel* had the shortest initial run. It's hard to imagine given the show's riches, not to mention a winning high school graduation scene and one of the more moving moments in musical theater: all Billy needs to do is wish more for his daughter, wish her to be free of his anger and sad past and live her life and be happy for this troubled man to be redeemed in the eyes of heaven. Gunn is open-hearted here as well to great effect. And the reprise of "You'll Never Walk Alone" is staged with wonderful simplicity by having the cast members slowly rise up out of their seats as the chorus builds. It's a touching finale to a delightful evening rich in musical pleasures.

## CHERRY LANE THEATRE

I'll do my best in writing this review. But no matter what level of quality I reach -- okay, pretty good or good (for me) -- you can be certain that it would sound much, much better if read aloud by actress Vanessa Redgrave. That's surely how Jesse Eisenberg (and indeed any playwright) would feel when she agreed to star in his new play *The Revisionist*. Hurrah! My play just got better!

It's curious that the talented Eisenberg would write a part for himself so similar to the screen persona he's had for years but that's exactly what he's done, albeit with less success. Eisenberg plays David, a young author who is struggling to revise his second novel, the follow-up to a young adult novel that got a fair amount of attention...and a bad review from the New York Times. Now in desperation to overcome distractions and perhaps doubting himself, David has invited himself to spend a week with a very distant relative living in a port city in Poland whom he's never met.

Maria (Redgrave) is thrilled; she leads a lonely existence with no close relations and her entire emotional life seems to revolve around the American branch of her family, people she's never met except for one happy day when she had coffee with one of them who was passing through. Having David spend an entire week with her is clearly a signal event.

Unfortunately, David is tiresomely self-absorbed and can't be bothered to offer up even the basic social niceties. You'd have to be pretty dim (and David is clearly intelligent) to think it's ok to show up on someone's doorstep and immediately turn your nose up at their food and insist on being left alone without even the formality of visiting and getting to know -- even for a few minutes -- this person who has agreed to open their home to you. I've no problem with David being a jerk or just indifferent. But he quickly becomes boringly rude and that's unforgivable.

I didn't catch Eisenberg's first play so I can't make any comparisons as far as growth. He has created two distinctive characters and scene to scene there is fun to be had in watching David try and grab a smoke while Maria ploddingly insists on his attention now and then. A late night drink fest that turns into a dark confession about her experiences during the war offers some brief drama.

But essentially Eisenberg has developed two characters without finding a story for them to tell, revelations or not revelations. Redgrave is especially strong at the start. But as the motivations for Maria become dimmer and dimmer, she struggles a bit to make sense of this opaque person. Eisenberg's screen charm translates easily to the stage but his David is even more inert than Maria. Daniel Oreskes is solid as a taxi cab driver (and Maria's lover) but he's not enough of a catalyst to drive the show.

We learn more about Maria and sense David's visit will be enshrined without irony among all her other mementoes of Maria's American relations. But information does not equal story. Neither character changes and I think we know just about everything we need in the first five minutes. Without the exceptional skill of Redgrave (who is a pleasure to watch), it's doubtful the show would have even the modest hold that it does on our attention.

One could joke and say *The Revisionist* needs more revisions. But Eisenberg has attempted a serious play and deserves more than flippancy. I look forward to his next work and seeing more growth in it than we can imagine for David's novel.

## THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

*As You Like it* (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) \*\*\*\*

*Chimichangas And Zolof* \*

*Closer Than Ever* \*\*\*

*Cock* \*\* 1/2

*Harvey* with Jim Parsons \*

*My Children! My Africa!* \*\*\*

*Once On This Island* \*\*\*  
*Potted Potter* \*  
*Storefront Church* \*\* 1/2  
*Title And Deed* \*\*\*  
*Picture Incomplete* (NYMF) \*\*  
*Flambe Dreams* (NYMF) \*\*  
*Rio* (NYMF) \*\*  
*The Two Month Rule* (NYMF) \*  
*Trouble* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*Stealing Time* (NYMF) \*\*  
*Requiem For A Lost Girl* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*Re-Animator The Musical* (NYMF) \*\*\*  
*Baby Case* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*How Deep Is The Ocean* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*Central Avenue Breakdown* (NYMF) \*\*\*  
*Foreverman* (NYMF) \* 1/2  
*Swing State* (NYMF) \* 1/2  
*Stand Tall: A Rock Musical* (NYMF) \* 1/2  
*Living With Henry* (NYMF) \*  
*A Letter To Harvey Milk* (NYMF) \*\* 1/2  
*The Last Smoker In America* \*\*  
*Gore Vidal's The Best Man* (w new cast) \*\*\*  
*Into The Woods at Delacorte* \*\* 1/2  
*Bring It On: The Musical* \*\*  
*Bullet For Adolf* \*  
*Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc.* \*\*  
*Harrison, TX* \*\*\*  
*Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck"* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2  
*Pink Milk* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2  
*Who Murdered Love* (FringeNYC) no stars  
*Storytime With Mr. Buttermen* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*#MormonInChief* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*An Interrogation Primer* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*An Evening With Kirk Douglas* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Sheherizade* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*The Great Pie Robbery* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Independents* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Dick and The Rose* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*Magdalen* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Bombsheltered* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Paper Plane* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Rated M For Murder* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Mallory/Valerie* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Non-Equity: The Musical!* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2  
*City Of Shadows* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking* \*\*\*  
*Salamander Starts Over* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Pieces* (FringeNYC) \*  
*The Train Driver* \*\*\*  
*Chaplin The Musical* \* 1/2  
*Detroit* \*\* 1/2  
*Heartless at Signature* \*\*  
*Einstein On The Beach* at BAM \*\*\*\*  
*Red-Handed Otter* \*\* 1/2  
*Marry Me A Little* \*\*  
*An Enemy Of The People* \*\* 1/2  
*The Old Man And The Old Moon* \*\*\* 1/2  
*A Chorus Line at Papermill* \*\*\*

*Helen & Edgar* \*\*\*  
*Grace* \* 1/2  
*Cyrano de Bergerac* \*\*  
*Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* \*\*\*  
*Disgraced* \*\*  
*Annie* \*\* 1/2  
*The Heiress* \*\*  
*Checkers* \*\* 1/2  
*Ivanov* \*\*\*  
*Golden Child* at Signature \*\* 1/2  
*Giant* at the Public \*\*\* 1/2  
*Scandalous* \* 1/2  
*Forever Dusty* \*\*  
*The Performers* \*\*  
*The Piano Lesson* at Signature \*\*\* 1/2  
*Un Ballo In Maschera* at the Met \*\*\* 1/2 (singing) \* (production) so call it \*\* 1/2  
*A Christmas Story: The Musical* \*\*  
*The Sound Of Music* at Papermill \*\*\*  
*My Name Is Asher Lev* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Golden Boy* \*\*  
*A Civil War Christmas* \*\* 1/2  
*Dead Accounts* \*\*  
*The Anarchist* \*  
*Glengarry Glen Ross* \*\*  
*Bare* \*\*  
*The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* \*\* 1/2  
*The Great God Pan* \*\* 1/2  
*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* \*\*

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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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