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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: December 8, 2010 03:26 PM

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Theater: *The Great Game* Gamble at The Public; *Les Miz* at Paper Mill

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The Great Game: Afghanistan *** out of ****
The Public Theater at NYU Skirball Center

So after 11 hours, 12 plays, numerous brief connecting pieces, and lengthy lunch and dinner breaks, does a theater-goer feel noble or entertained or just exhausted by *The Great Game: Afghanistan*? A bit of all three, of course, along with the expected disclaimer that the various short plays are of varying quality. But this is definitely a case of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Far from a simple screed calling our invasion a cock-up that mirrors previous cock-ups by the Brits, the Soviets, Alexander the Great and

everyone else, this is a willfully complex look at foreign involvement that examines the story from many sides and doesn't spare anyone. The cast is strong though the men fare better than the women -- just like in Afghanistan. Tom McKay is the first among many excellent actors and Jemma Redgrave (yes, talent is genetic) superior among the women.

The plays range all over the map in style and quality, from the amusing "Durand's Line" in which a British foreign minister is deaf to the insights of the Amir of Afghanistan about the real-world disaster his arbitrarily drawn borders will create to "Campaign," a look at the steely pressure the UK government places upon a college professor to endorse its latest strategy.

In between the plays come quick little bursts of monologues, duologues and straight-forward presentations of quotes from real-life figures like Hilary Clinton, journalist William Dalrymple, General McChrystal and the like. These are brief and sometimes informative but dramatically inert. The show as a whole would be better without them. Plenty of context comes from the homework the audience is given before each part -- brief but informative two page essays that give background and historical context.

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The plays are arranged chronologically which is unfortunate dramatically. This means we end in the present watching a soldier and his wife argue, with her insisting Afghanistan is a mess and the troops aren't helping anymore and she's exhausted by the worry and doesn't want him to sign up for another tour. He in turn recounts a sobering, heartbreaking story of a little girl who was disfigured for daring to go to school. The piece, "Canopy of Stars" by Simon Stephens is fine and performed very well, but it ends the show right where the audience began: believing the occupation of Afghanistan has outlived its usefulness though understanding that moment to moment some good might be accomplished.

This should be the first play we see, so the audience doesn't end their experience of *The Great Game* by hearing an echo of what they probably felt going in. It would also allow the mosaic of plays to add context and diversity to that snapshot of Western opinion voiced at the end *and* it might allow the show to end with its strongest play. (Indeed, perhaps the entire night should be performed in reverse chronological order.)

That play - "Bugles at the Gate of Jalalabad" by Stephen Jeffreys" -- is now the opener, showing a group of British soldiers in 1842 who play their bugles hour after hour in hopes of signaling to any survivors of a massacre that safe haven can be found. (McKay is in this and "Canopy of Stars," as is the very good Karl Davies.) A counterpoint to the soldiers' banter and confused reaction to a local who confronts them with awkward and penetrating questions is the presence of Lady Sale (Redgrave), who survived the massacre and her later captivity to write a best-selling memoir about the experience. Redgrave is riveting and the piece as a whole so solid and absorbing it sets an expectation the rest of the show can't match.

But even weaker moments -- like the melodramatic story of aid groups struggling to make a difference called "On the Side of the Angels" by Richard Bean or the stiff, unconvincing "Now Is the Time" by Joy Wilkinson about the flight of the King of Afghanistan in 1929 -- add to our insights of the country as a whole. "Worthy" comes across as damning with faint praise but that's exactly what this well-acted event ultimately is -- worthy of your time.

What others have said:

Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* said, "Seeing all three sets of four plays in one day, I was seldom bored or impatient, even if only a few of the individual works meet the standards usually asked of first-rate drama."

Elisabeth Vincentelli of the *New York Post* gave it 3 out of 4 stars and said, ""The Great Game" is often gripping, but then it'd be hard to make this subject matter boring. Still, a few visually inspired scenes -- like the swift, clever representation of the Twin Towers' fall -- make you wish for more. The show would have made the jump from very good to memorable if it had committed to theater as much as to education."

Andy Probst of *Theateman* said, "Offers a fascinating series of snapshots of events -- both public and private -- in the country's history over the course of nearly 170 years. And while the writing for the epic works proves uneven, there is a sweep to the event -- which Nicholas Kent and Indhu Rubasingham have directed jointly with impressive economy -- that proves to be unquestionably compelling. In part, the credit belongs to the superlative work of a company that switches between roles with the skill of human chameleons."

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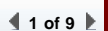
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Les Miserables 25th Anniversary Tour *** out of ****
At the [Paper Mill Playhouse](#)

The Broadway revival of *Les Miz* came just a few brief years after the show had closed and was so identical in staging and style -- and so inferior in casting -- that it left a bad taste over one of the landmark works in musical theater. (And please don't lump in *Les Miz* with dreck like *The Phantom Of The Opera*, *Miss Saigon* and other 80s mega-musicals. It is far bolder, far more ambitious and boasts one of the great Broadway scores of all time.)

Happily, the 25th anniversary touring production now at the Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey is superior in every way. It bypasses the "turntable" staging of the original to forge its own identity without trying to reinvent the wheel, so to speak. That turntable was crucial to the original show's flowing, cinematic style. Here directors Laurence Connor and James Powell present much the same tableaux, but the lack of that turntable forces them and their collaborators to think in slightly different terms. This keeps the staging fresh (though one can't help noticing at times they do seem to miss it, especially when the cast is encouraged in some scenes to simply move in a circle as if the turntable were still there).

More importantly, the singing is stronger. Usually, in a touring production, one or two leads will be outstanding while the rest of the cast is notably inferior. Mind you, touring productions are of far higher quality than in the 70s and earlier, thanks to shows like *Les Miz* which demanded high standards. Nonetheless, a few stars typically outshine the rest. Here, almost the reverse is true, with the chorus dominating your memory. That's only fitting for a musical dominated by rousing numbers like "One Day More" and "Finale (aka Do You Hear the People Sing?)" Here's video of this production, which does not include all the current cast members but gives you a sense of this version as a whole.

Lawrence Clayton is a fine Jean Valjean and Andrew Varela is an outstanding Javert. (I've never seen a better performance of Javert's signature tune "Stars" and Varela also benefits from one of the show's best visual flourishes.) Cosette is always outshone by Eponine, if only because "On My Own" is so much better than the show's one weak tune, "A Heart Full Of Love," and Chasten Harmon as the waif is no exception.

While the Thenardiers (Michael Kostroff and Shawna M. Hamic) fail to make the most of their comic numbers (with Hamic faring a little better), minor roles shine again and again, such as Jeremy Hays as the firebrand Enjolras and Joseph Spieldenner as the cynical drunken student Grantaire.

This is not a subtle *Les Miz*, which is fitting for a touring show that is playing big spaces like the Paper Mill. But it's a fine introduction to a great musical for beginners and a solid revisiting of a classic without offering any new insights or revelatory staging. And when that chorus comes together on the show-stopping numbers that end the first act and climax at the end, the strength of the full-bodied orchestra and the excellent voices throughout shine. Their ringing call to arms echoes in your mind long after the curtain falls.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is 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 free on iTunes](#). Visit [Michael Giltz at his website](#) and his [daily blog](#).

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NOTE: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to the shows with the understanding that he would be writing a review.


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