

Theater: *Hands On A Hardbody*? No Sale for This New Musical

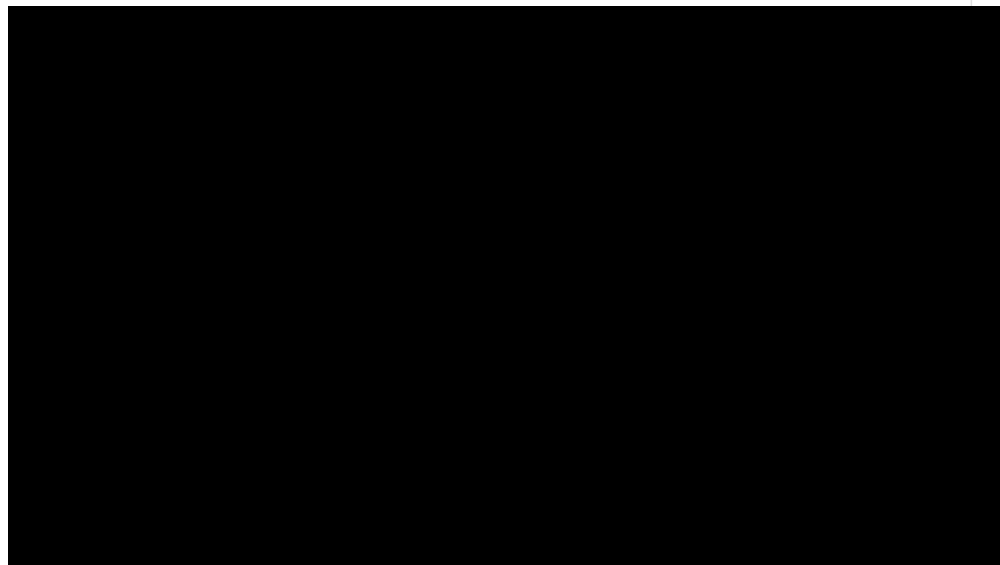
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HANDS ON A HARDBODY * out of **** **BROOKS ATKINSON THEATRE**

This new musical is such an odd duck on paper that you couldn't help thinking maybe something good would come out of it. In an era when many musicals are based on world-famous comic books are best-selling children's stories and fairy tales, *Hands On A Hardbody* is based on a documentary most people have never heard about.

The subject matter? A contest in a small Texas town where a group of people keep their hands on a brand new truck for days on end with a 15 minute break every six hours. The last one to still be touching it wins the truck. You can see how the challenges inherent to this might appeal. A musical where everyone is essentially rooted to one spot, with at least one hand touching the truck at all times? Serjio Trujillo is credited with musical staging and he has some modestly inventive fun moving the actors around and around that gleaming red truck.

Since the characters are stuck on the lot of a car dealership, you might imagine the show will be a character study a la *Assassins*, where each person steps forward and tells their story. That's what we have here in a book by Doug Wright (*I Am My Own Wife*) and lyrics by Amanda Green (*Bring It On*) and music by Green and Trey Anastasio of Phish. Unfortunately, every character is a type we know immediately and no song, no plot twist changes or deepens our initial impression. You've got a returning war vet who wants to prove to his family he can still accomplish something, two kids who fall in love during the contest and dream of heading to LA, a religious woman who has prayer chains galore rooting for her to win and a deep conviction that God wants her to have that truck, a young man who wants to sell the truck so he can go to veterinary school, a blonde ringer who is fooling around with the head of the dealership, a stubborn old coot of a woman and Keith Carradine as an aging man recovering from surgery who just wants to feel useful again, to name a few.



Nothing any of these people say or do during the five days of the contest will surprise you

in the least. The lead trouble maker is Benny (Hunter Foster) who already won a truck in the contest before and a guy who's watched too many episodes of *Survivor*. Benny thinks the only way to win is to taunt and prey on the weaknesses of others. Turns out his son died fighting overseas and Benny's wife left him for another man (taking that truck with her) so you can bet we'll feel a little sorry for him before it's over.

It's hard to feel a rooting interest in who wins. The church lady really needs the truck to drive her kids to school and such. Ronald (Jacob Ming-Trent) wants to use it to start his own lawn service. Jesus Pena (Jon Rua) is the guy who wants to go to college. But of course how can we not root for the affable Keith Carradine? Yet he doesn't seem to need the truck at all. The show misses whatever little emotional heft it might have by not reaching for a grander gesture at the end when it comes to winners and losers.

Of course the really grand gesture is the religious undercurrent where souls need to be saved and people need to repent for their hateful prejudice. That's made explicit in "God Answered My Prayers" (though it's an old religious joke -- God said "No.") But the redemption of Benny isn't terribly interesting since we don't see the church lady or anyone else saying or doing anything that might conceivably cause the wonder-working transformation of this bitter, sad man. It just...happens. Still, the songs that go for a religious bent are the modest high points of the show, especially "Joy Of The Lord," in which the contestants create the rhythm of a revival meeting by pounding their hands on the side of the truck and even beep the horn at the climax. Combine that with clever choreography and you have a small glimpse of a far more interesting show.

Musically, I'm not sure if it sounds like country and gospel played by Broadway musicians or Broadway music played by country and gospel musicians. But however they got there, the arrangements are inauthentic and anonymous throughout. Mind you, the songs aren't helped by a weak-voiced cast. Keith Carradine has charm to spare but his vocals are modest. That's fine except that he's surrounded by people who also need to talk-sing and act their way through a song rather than belt it out, with the exception of Keala Settle as the one-note but strong-voiced church lady Norma.

Combine this anonymous heartland vibe with a drab set dominated by a faded brown billboard and you've got a show that isn't nearly Broadway enough for theater fans, country enough for music fans or quirky enough for fans of the movie. Here the risk-taking started and ended with the choice of project. No creative choices after that one were nearly bold enough.

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 **
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 *

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* 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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