

# Theater: Here Lies Love Parties On; August Wilson Lives On

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**HERE LIES LOVE** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**6TH ANNUAL AUGUST WILSON MONOLOGUE COMPETITION**

**SEA MARKS** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**SELECTED SHORTS: NEIL GAIMAN** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**A TIME TRAVELER'S TRIP TO NIAGARA** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**HERE LIES LOVE** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**PUBLIC THEATER**

Have you ever arrived late to a party that's already at full blast? Sometimes you feel overwhelmed and out of sorts; you never quite sync to the goings-on and feel like a bystander. Other times, you dive right in and are immediately having fun without the bother of small talk and building up to that happy energy.

Well, the party has already started for Here Lies Love. Don't worry, though -- you'll have fun as soon as you show up. It's received loads of great reviews, awards from various and sundry and has settled into a long and unprecedented commercial run right at the Public Theater. The cast album has just been released. And if this production were eligible for the Tonys, I've no doubt it would win Best Musical.

Conceived by David Byrne, it's a musical about the rise and fall of Imelda Marcos in the Philippines. (Maybe the sequel will cover her rise again, since Marcos is currently serving as an elected official in that country's Congress, having won re-election by a landslide for her seat.) I'd heard about the high concept staging, which involves a deejay and hints of the discos Imelda frequented in her jet-setting days and the karaoke she loved. (Karaoke was born in the Philippines, by the way.)

So I was prepared for fun and silliness and some dependably good songs. What I wasn't prepared for was the genuine depth of the show. It charts an emotional journey for Imelda, which isn't easy since she's such an unreflective person who by her own admission turns away whenever she sees something ugly, like garbage in the streets. She must have turned away a lot in her life. Here Lies Love shows her springboard to fame via beauty pageants, falling in love, turning aside from Aquino (Conrad Ricamora) and his political passion, marrying Marcos (Jose Llana) and becoming her country's first lady and an international celebrity even as she ignores her past, her husband's infidelities, her growing dependence on prescription drugs and the brutal nature of their hold on power for decades.

It's cleverly staged, with most of the audience standing on the floor, with a series of connected platforms moved by stagehands this way and that as ushers direct us to move to the left or the right. At both ends of the space are two stages. Sometimes you're focused on one end, sometimes people are duetting with each other from across the room. Other times the movable stages serve as a catwalk and politicians are leaning down into the crowd, shaking hands and asking for your vote. Video monitors line the walls, with cameras used at certain points to catch the media frenzy as this or that person reaches out to the people of the Philippines and makes their case. All the while, a deejay in a booth high above us plays the tracks that the actors sing along to or urges everyone to dance.

It's buoyant, smart and always to a purpose. The disco setting and hints of karaoke are modest background, not a concept that over-powers the story. When we see Imelda (Ruthie Ann Miles) talking about her childhood and relating the story of her rise from poverty, it's told with simple hand-made props you might find in a school play, reflecting her hard-scrabble youth. When those video cameras flash footage of actors on screen, they're in the public role of figures seeking elected office or waging war on the government's dictatorial methods by risking life and limb to speak out on the news. When David Byrne uses a quote from Imelda to create the song "Star and Slave," director Alex Timbers has the actress come down and walk through the crowd so she can be "one of the people." (And of course, the center of attention.) When Imelda's hair stiffens into an ugly, matriarchal bun, you know the happy times are over.

It's the best work Timbers has done and a triumph for all involved. It's also logistically impressive, with so many costume changes and moving parts -- I'd love to watch backstage but doubt there's a free inch of space to stand in. The scenic design by David Korins makes a virtue of the setting. When Imelda is getting married, a friend from her childhood watches from afar. The actress simply holds a section of fence on rollers in front of her, moving it around to always keep the fence between her and Imelda. It's simple and wonderfully effective. The costume design by Clint Ramos is colorful and spot-on. The lighting (Justin Townsend), sound design (M.L. Dogg & Cody Spencer) and projection design (Peter Nigrini) all work beautifully together. The choreography by Annie-B Parson pulls from traditional Filipino dance to disco and all stops in between with great results.

Too often, high concept shows become more about the concept than the story. Not here. Is it a catalog of the very real evils of the Marcos regime? No, but you'd have to be foolish to think this show turns away from ugliness the way Imelda does. Tellingly, there is no song about shoes -- they're not here to deliver easy jokes or a surface appraisal of Imelda. Timbers keeps the focus on the characters that Byrne (along with music by Byrne & Fatboy Slim with Jose Llana and additional music by Tom Gandey & J Pardo) has brought to life.

The cast is exceptional from top to bottom and certainly constitutes one of the sexiest group of actors you'll find in New York right now. Ricamora is sexily passionate as Aquino, Llana compellingly handsome as Marcos and Miles sings beautifully and brings Imelda in all her self-deluding glory vividly to the stage. The original casting by Jordan Thaler & Heidi Griffiths (with additional casting by Tara Rubin Casting) is stellar. We should be seeing these talents flourish in other parts. But not right away. They need to keep Here Lies Love running for a long, long time. If The Donkey Show and other immersive events can run Off Broadway for years, this smart and sexy and wildly entertaining work of theater should certainly be able to do the same.

As I mentioned, the cast album has just come out. [You can buy it from David Byrne's entertaining website](#). It does indeed have gorgeous packaging that digital can't offer. And why not buy it from Byrne since more money will go to the artist rather than some third party retailer? He's got a great essay about the future of music and artists in an all-digital, all-streaming world. [Check it out](#).

## 6TH ANNUAL AUGUST WILSON MONOLOGUE COMPETITION AUGUST WILSON THEATRE

For years, one of the highlights of the spring is the August Wilson Monologue Competition. It began in Atlanta, Georgia: high school students prepared a monologue from one of the plays of August Wilson. The best came to New York City for a great weekend immersed in the world of the theater. Winners received a scholarship towards college. Well, it's spread in just six years to numerous cities around the country and a few days ago, the finals were held again - appropriately enough, at the August Wilson theater.

You can [go to YouTube and find countless videos of teenagers all over the country working on and perfecting their monologues for this event](#). It's fun and inspiring and quite moving to see Wilson's words spreading like wildfire. Here's one video about young actors in Portland preparing and sharing their thoughts on Wilson and his work.

Director Kenny Leon was the host and he kept the proceedings focused strictly on the positive: this wasn't a competition so much as a celebration of Wilson's remarkable body of work and the talent of these young actors. He made jokes, did push-ups during a brief pause, high-fived the actors after their turn in the spotlight and charmed and relaxed them all. (Though to be honest, the teens who had already delivered their monologues joined his energy a lot more readily than the ones still nervously waiting their turn> :)

The judges were an impressive crowd (including among others director David Cromer and the great Stephen McKinley Henderson). Boston, Chicago and Atlanta produced the three winners but the entire night was certainly a positive event for all. As a surprise, Denzel Washington (starring in Leon's acclaimed revival of *A Raisin In The Sun* to standing room only audiences) popped in, essentially freaking the kids out in a good way as he offered some preaching about their dreams and what's important in life. He said it's not about making a lot of money and buying your mom a house -- "But buy your mom a house!" he insisted amusingly -- and as a final comment, generously donated \$1,000 for every teen who participated and made it to New York City, a 20+ strong group of kids.

Best of all, the audience got to hear choice selections from Wilson's work, which only makes you eager to see and read them all over again.

**SEA MARKS** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

### **IRISH REPERTORY THEATRE**

This very modest play by the late Gardner McKay is a two-hander about two awkward people who fall in love in the late 1960s. One is Colin (Patrick Fitzgerald), a lonely fisherman in his forties who plies his trade from the island of Cliffhorn Heads. The other is Timothea (Xanthe Elbrick), a woman making her way in the publishing business in Liverpool.

Colin met Timothea at a local wedding, where he promptly put his hand in a punch bowl while trying to be suave. Some while later, he bravely writes her a letter, mentioning their brief chat, suggesting she must surely remember him and asking her to write him back if it's not too much trouble.

At first, what follows looks to be an epistolary play, with one actor speaking aloud the letter they wrote and the other picking up as they begin to read it. No, she doesn't remember him but is intrigued enough to write back. He writes back again and in classic 84 Charing Cross Road fashion, their formal greetings and goodbyes become more informal and then downright romantic. Not least of all, Timothea is charmed by Colin's way with words as he describes his life battling the sea and the people of his village.

You might think you can chart the rest, but this ultimately confusing play has fooled you. She comes back for a visit and he makes the first trip of his life and visits her in Liverpool where -- scandalously -- he stays in her home. (The Beatles are big and free love is in the air.) Colin is a virgin and frankly the spinsterish Timothea seems like one too. But in many unlikely twists that are hard to swallow, after seeming to imply she's as new to this as he, Timothea is describing her first time with a lad in a barn. Does she like Colin because he's rustic?

In the blink of an eye, Timothea morphs into a career gal of sorts. Naturally, without telling him she's had his letters reframed as poetry and published in a book. A local reading looms, but she makes it sound like the make or break proposition of a lifetime. It's hard to imagine Colin spending even a day outside the comfort zone of his tiny village but here he is in Liverpool. That's lovely but her sudden expectation that he would drop his entire way of life, sit in her apartment, stare at the walls and write is just bizarre. Is she an idiot?

Even more bizarrely, suddenly he's wondering why she didn't mention her husband works at the same building where Timothea works. Wait, she's been married? They're divorced but he's a con artist and just out of jail? This doozy is mentioned once or twice and then dropped, even though the ex shows up at the apartment and Colin offers to teach him how to fish. Soon, we're longing for the show to return to its simpler, epistolary nature.

Elbrick can't make sense of such a nonsensical, changeable character. Fitzgerald is better with his more consistent role, though he overplays the dramatics in his big, final monologue at that reading. Less is more. As is often the case with the Irish Rep, their small, awkward space inspires good scenic design (here by Charlie Corcoran) and other solid tech efforts, especially the lighting by Michael Gottlieb and the effective sound design by M. Florian Staab that doesn't overplay squawking gulls or the sounds of the big city. Ciarán O'Reilly directs ably enough but what is really needed is a major rewrite.

### **SELECTED SHORTS: NEIL GAIMAN** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\* **SYMPHONY SPACE**

It's been a while since I've made it to Symphony Space -- too long, really. It's a warm space that serves as a center of music and movies and the arts in general. Selected Shorts is a long-running program that is performed here and [airs weekly from WNYC on 130 stations around the country via Public Radio International](#). Seeing it live, for a change, was a special treat.

[Neil Gaiman](#) was the attraction and he and the folks at Selected Shorts chose some pieces of his as well as other writers he wanted to celebrate. The audience was packed, for Gaiman is a rock star when it comes to public events. As is usual, the evening was a varied sort with Gaiman and other actors taking their turns. John Cameron Mitchell (on two works, including the amusing "Adventure Story") and Kirsten Vangsness were very strong. But the night was stolen by Denis O'Hare who delivered Gaiman's "The Man Who Forgot [Ray Bradbury](#)" with wonderful verve and emotion.

Gaiman paid tribute to two favorites of his by having Rita Wolf perform Angela Carter's "The Company Of Wolves" while he read "Evening Primrose" by the all-but-forgotten John Collier. Carter's tale was a little tricky for performing live and Collier's fanciful work about people secretly living in a department store was perhaps too long. But Gaiman's engaging presence (quiet and magnetic as he spoke to the audience bathed in darkness) kept the night a happy one, ending with his sweet story "July Tale."

[Future shows include a tribute to Dorothy Parker on May 21](#) (including Hope Davis) and [Tales After Dark on June 11](#) (including Josh Radnor of How I Met Your Mother). And of course [Selected Shorts airs every week on the radio](#).

I didn't spot any video from the event, but here's Gaiman reading Green Eggs and Ham.

### **A TIME TRAVELER'S TRIP TO NIAGARA** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\* **HUDSON GUILD**

It happens all the time: two movies with the same concept, like an adult being switched into a child's body and the child taking over the adult's body. Two books about an obscure historical event that the authors labored over privately for years. And here we have two plays based on and inspired by the works of legendary figures from the American theater's past. Both plays use that work as a springboard for all sorts of meta-theatrical tricks. Unfortunately, the comparisons will not be kind since An Octoroon has opened to raves and solidified Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins as a major talent while A Time-Traveler's Trip To Niagara will pass without much comment at all.

Niagara is based very loosely on [a play by William Dunlap](#), certainly a key person in the development of American theater. It served as the basis for a collaborative work by a group of writers. I'm not sure such a piece-meal effort would ever be a good idea, but surely it would be wise to choose a story that was episodic in nature. This play has a complex jumping back and forth from the present to the past, with each time-stream sometimes (or to be accurate randomly) crossing each other's path. It would depend on a very consistent authorial voice, not the playwriting by committee used here.

In the early 1800s, a sister and her whiny brother are taking a trip to Niagara, where she will meet her true love

but feel incapable of acting on it since he is black and she is white and the world would be against them. In the present, a distant relative is tracing that woman's journey with her whiny brother in tow. No points for wondering if she might find romance and fulfill the dreams of that woman long ago. The actors all had their moments of stumbling over dialogue, covering nicely. And the costumes of Emily Blumenauer were the most inventive at making the most of modest resources.

But somehow I left feeling a little moved. Not by the show, but by the efforts of the actors. They all presumably have other, paying jobs and yet here they were, devoting their time and energy to a play in a tiny space most people have never heard of much less been to, still dreaming of a life in the theater. The audience was depressingly sparse and four people sitting together left at the intermission, nearly cutting the crowd in half. And they were all solid, as good as the material would allow, really. Andrew Kelz had the very unfortunate role of Krissalynn in the present (almost none of the play happening in the present was of interest). But he did well in his other parts. Christine Farrell has a distinctive Kathleen Chalfant-like voice and was good in multiple roles, especially the playwright. Max Arnaud moped about appropriately as the brother. But the two romantic leads had genuine chemistry. When John-Andrew Morrison was allowed to repeat some lines of Shakespeare, the night improved tremendously. And Crystal Arnette had stage presence and charm, especially in their scenes together. That's no small feat in a ramshackle work done in the least forgiving circumstances. A life in the theater is rarely easy. But brief moments hinting at what might be -- with a better part in a better show -- are surely what keep them going.

Bonus clip: Here's Neil Gaiman talking about the three books that changed his life.

## THEATER OF 2014

[Beautiful: The Carole King Musical](#) \*\*\*

[Rodney King](#) \*\*\*

[Hard Times](#) \*\* 1/2

[Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead](#) \*\*

[I Could Say More](#) \*

[The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner](#) \*\*

[Machinal](#) \*\*\*

[Outside Mullingar](#) \*\*\*

[A Man's A Man](#) \* 1/2

[The Tribute Artist](#) \*\* 1/2

[Transport](#) \*\*

[Prince Igor at the Met](#) \*\*

[The Bridges Of Madison County](#) \*\* 1/2

[Kung Fu \(at Signature\)](#) \*\*

[Stage Kiss](#) \*\*\*

[Satchmo At The Waldorf](#) \*\*\*

[Antony and Cleopatra at the Public](#) \*\*

[All The Way](#) \*\* 1/2

[The Open House \(Will Eno at Signature\)](#) \*\* 1/2

[Wozzeck \(at Met w Deborah Voigt and Thomas Hampson and Simon O'Neill\)](#)

[Hand To God](#) \*\*\*

[Tales From Red Vienna](#) \*\*

[Appropriate \(at Signature\)](#) \*

[Rocky](#) \* 1/2

[Aladdin](#) \*\*\*

[Mothers And Sons](#) \*\*