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## Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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# Hero Plus Fringefest #3: Musicals Galore!

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Hurricane Irene threw a spanner in the works when it came to my theater coverage: thanks to living in a low-lying area and that mandatory evacuation and flooding in my basement, I'm just catching up with some recent shows. The Korean musical *Hero* had a brief run at Lincoln Center. And the final weekend of FringeFest was cut short by storm warnings. Luckily, FringeFest features encore performances from September 9 through September 26 so people can catch the best of the best. [Get more info here.](#)

### HERO: THE MUSICAL \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

How do you say *Les Miz* in Korean? It's fascinating how pervasive the influence has been of that iconic musical from the 1980s. It's almost impossible to mount a period piece like *Hero* -- which details the Korean rebel who assassinated the head of the Japanese occupying army and was executed soon after -- without standing in the shadow of that production. From the flag-waving at the beginning to the rousing numbers that rally the troops to the love story on the side, *Hero* tells the beloved tale of An Chunggun's struggle to free his country with all the trappings of a Broadway show.

This production with book and lyrics by A Reum Han and Music by Sang Joon Oh has everything but complexity and great songs. The production design is solid, the choreography decent, the direction fluid -- all of it lets you know this is a show that can stand toe to toe with most Broadway shows. The cast is earnestly strong, with Chung Sungwha the focus throughout as our upright, stirring and thoroughly

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decent hero. But too few of the songs take advantage of the large cast on tap. Only one or two numbers bring out the full cast to belt out a big number when the tale of fighting for independence and freedom is one that almost demands shamelessly rousing choruses.

The story feels paper thin, just as most tales of George Washington are rather cardboard cutout. An Chunggun is so noble and true that he's a tad dull, despite Chung Sungwha's passionate work. Even the Japanese guards are won over by his sincerity. The show's one attempt at complexity was a bit surprising: in a scene where our hero chats with the ghost of the assassinated head of the Japanese invading force, they both recognize a kindred spirit and see themselves as working dutifully for their countries. I certainly didn't expect that and neither did the audience. The scene where the assassination took place got the biggest applause of the night. The scene where the two men duet and see the humanity in the other? Almost dead silence. Sometimes, audiences want their villains to twirl that mustache. *Hero* proves the Korean theater can compete on a world stage; now they just need a show that can display its talents more fully.

#### YEAST NATION (THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE)\*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

Surely the most anticipated show of FringeFest, *Yeast Nation* comes from Greg Kotis (book and lyrics and direction) and Mark Hollmann (music and lyrics), the team behind this festival's biggest success story: *Urinetown*. I was a little worried that they'd outgrown the fest and using it as a testing ground for new work was cheating somehow. But this show about yeast cells fighting for survival in the primordial soup where life began on earth is so offbeat you quickly realize it's hardly some slam-dunk commercial project and earns its fringe-iness fairly. It was great to see it so close and at such an early stage, but for all the pleasure it provided, I'm not terribly eager to see it again.

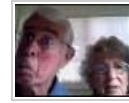
Harriet Harris has a blast (and is a crowd favorite) as Jan The Unnamed, the narrator of the story, which quickly takes on a familiar shape despite the odd setting. Jan The Elder (George McDaniel) has strict rules for the yeast cells in his care, but some of them will rebel and try and reach the surface to see what's what. Jan The Second (a dashing Erik Altemus) will of course fall in love with one of the rule-breakers and rebel against his father. Some like Jan The Sly (Joy Suprano) just want power. Others like Jan the Sweet (Emily Tarpey) genuinely worry about the future and believe their yeast world will fall if it doesn't learn to rise to the challenges they face.

It's silly and goofy and certainly good-natured. But the songs are merely serviceable. A tune that might be called "Love Is Pain" is the standout exception to this rule, along with one or maybe two others. Everyone hams it up nicely, but it must be said that except for Harris and McDaniel (who both have relatively easy comic numbers) the singing is quite poor. The main young leads all struggled at times with their notes. They seem to have been cast more for their acting and comic chops -- all of them were solid in that department -- rather than for singing ability. But in New York you shouldn't have to choose. And while Harris is incorporated into the plot, I wish she had even more to do than grumble on and off stage at various times, no matter how winningly she does it.

So why three out of four stars? Because it's fun and in a small space with the right expectations, it hits

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the sweet spot. However the premise doesn't seem terribly interesting or worth fleshing out more and they'd have to come up with a lot better songs to do so. At this stage, after four years of development it feels like *Yeast Nation* has risen to its full potential.

#### THE BARDY BUNCH \* 1/2 OUT OF \*\*\*\*

*The Bardy Bunch* is surely the most shamelessly commercial of the shows at FringeFest. It's subtitled "The War Of The Families Partridge and Brady" and posits a bitter rivalry between the two households. Throw in a love story between Greg Brady and Laurie Partridge and you've got Romeo & Juliet combined with lots of goofy pop songs.

I wish I could say it's also the most shamelessly entertaining. But, despite a game cast, that's far from the truth. In short it's the world of those 70s sitcoms crossed with the bloody passion of William Shakespeare. Unfortunately, the show never commits to a single style. A 70s sitcom plot delivered in faux Shakespearean dialogue is funny. A bloody Shakespearean tragedy delivered in goofy, cheerful 70s sitcom style is funny. But writer Stephen Garvey just mashes them all together haphazardly. Some scenes have fake Shakespearean dialogue while others have bland TV patter and there's not guessing from moment to moment who might say what.

The story is similarly random. You know the bodies will pile up and you know someone is going to sing "I Think I Love You" at some point or another. Other than that it's a free for all. You've got bits of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and *R&J* and the romances. You've also got passing references to every highlight of the two shows you can imagine. If the mere line "Marcia! Marcia! Marcia!" fills you with delight, this is the show for you. You can also expect all the obvious bits: a broken nose, a theme park development, a cardboard tube, Cousin Oliver, the dunking booth, magic tricks, Hawaii and so on. If you took five minutes to list all the big plot points from *The Brady Bunch*, you can be sure most if not all of them are dutifully mentioned here.

it's a pity because the cast -- clearly brought on board more for their acting and physical resemblance than singing -- is up to the task. The adult figures all do well and the lead teens -- A.J. Shively as Greg, Erik Keiser as Keith especially -- are all spot-on. And the anonymous middle kids get their revenge. Both Peter (Jonathan Grunert) and Jan (Annie Watkins) are given the chance to shine and do. Notably, it occurs at the points in the show where the story is taken the most seriously (and thus is the most amusing). Peter sings that song about his voice changing but it works quite well in the new context of him wanting to take control for a change. And Jan contemplates suicide via dunking booth. Less randomness and a frantic desire to work in every possible totemic moment from the shows replaced by more focus and seriousness would make *The Bardy Bunch* a lot funnier. And pick a verbal style and stick with it -- or at least be consistent within characters. Maybe the villains speak in Shakespearean dialogue and the others can't quite understand what they say? Or something, anything to give this mash-up some consistency and a point of view.

#### PARKER & DIZZY'S FABULOUS JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE RAINBOW \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

This is the most promising musical I saw at FringeFest. Peter Zachari wrote the book, created the music and lyrics with Damon Maida, directed and stars as Parker. I assume he also catered but there's no mention of it anywhere. It's a sweet, goofy show about two gay friends: one smart and gay savvy and bearish (Zachari) and the other a goofy, silly sexy and none-too-bright number (Joey Mirabile, who also did the fine choreography) who falls in love with whomever is standing in front of him. Together, they are pulled into a mysterious adventure involving clones of famous gay icons, a secret society and a desire to take over the world! (Or at least Greenwich Village.)

Happily, the musical numbers are already quite strong. The show begins with one of the best, "Forever Is A Memory," belted out with tremendous panache by Steven Polito aka Hedda Lettuce. Our heroes go on their quest and meet up with characters like Cowboy (Jacob R. Thompson, who makes the awkward GPenis" seem sweet) and Old Man Jasper (John Weigand, who has fun with "The Troll Song").

The first act was so strong I was really eager for the rest. As so often happens with musicals, the second act can be trouble (hey, it happens to Sondheim, Mr. Zachari, so don't despair). Personally, I don't like intermissions unless the show is so long it demands it or the story needs it. This one doesn't and a shorter tighter show would be more fun. But if you're going to have a first act, clearly it should end with the charming duet between Parker and Dizzy called "What Makes A Friend." The second act needs to be refocused and much tighter. The stunt casting of Rodiney Santiago of TV's *The A List: New York* is unfortunate. His English simply isn't up to the task of delivering lines comprehensibly onstage, no matter



sarah\_ross

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how much his sculpted body fits the bill of the role he performs.

At the very least, *Parker & Dizzy* should end with our two heroes and friends reunited and heading off into the sunset instead of having Dizzy disappear for two numbers before the finale. Instead it ends very weakly with the two least effective numbers of the night. "Retouch Your Heart" is a would-be bit of sincerity that should go back in the trunk and stay there, I'm sorry to say. And the ending is a real puzzler. Instead of our gay Bill & Ted team back together, Parker literally wanders off to sit on a bench. Then a nice old lady starts chatting with him and sings the bland "Rainbow Lullaby" -- the second "inspirational" number in a row, which is two too many in my book -- and then takes off. What the heck was that all about? But so much of the show is so good and the spirit of it so delightful, I hope Zachari is inspired to do the hard work to make this promising work even better for the next time it's staged in New York.

#### **The Theater Season 2011-2012** (on a four star scale)

*All's Well That Ends Well/Shakespeare in the Park* \*\*

*Broadway By The Year: 1997* \*\* 1/2

*Hair* \*\*\*

*Hero: The Musical* \* 1/2

*Master Class w Tyne Daly* \*\* 1/2

*Measure For Measure/Shakespeare in the Park* \*\*\*

*Olive and The Bitter Herbs* \*\* 1/2

*One Arm* \*\*\*

*Silence! The Musical* \* 1/2

*Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark* \* 1/2

*Unnatural Acts* \*\*\*

*Zarkana* \*\*

#### **FRINGEFEST NYC 2011**

*The Bardy Bunch* \*\*

*Books On Tape* \*\* 1/2

*Civilian* \*\*

*Hard Travelin' With Woody* \*\*\*

*Leonard Cohen Koans* \*\*\* 1/2

*Paper Cuts* \*\*\*

*Parker & Dizzy's Fabulous Journey To The End Of The Rainbow* \*\* 1/2

*Rachel Calof* \*\* 1/2

*Romeo & Juliet: Choose Your Own Ending* \*\*

*2 Burn* \* 1/2

*Walls and Bridges* \*\*

*What The Sparrow Said* \*\* 1/2

*Yeast Nation* \*\*\*

*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 was provided with free tickets to these show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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