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**Michael Giltz**

Freelance writer

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## Theater: Hugh Jackman Razzle Dazzles Broadway in New Show

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**HUGH JACKMAN: BACK ON BROADWAY** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**BROADHURST THEATRE**

Liza Minnelli. Sammy Davis Jr. Hugh Jackman. Really? Really!

Jackman isn't gifted with the remarkable voices of those two entertainers. But when you're trying to describe Jackman's new evening at the Broadhurst, you keep coming back to old school pros like Liza and Sammy. You want razzle? You get razzle. You want dazzle? You get dazzle. You get a swinging orchestra, backup singers and dancers, costume changes, stories from Hollywood

and the Outback, sequins, sass and if you think showbiz schmaltz isn't your thing, well I'm sorry. Resistance is futile.

Almost everyone who saw Jackman's Tony-winning Broadway debut in the musical *The Boy From Oz* had the same reaction: it's a pity they couldn't just forget the show and let Jackman keep on singing and talking away. Every time he played with the audience (in the guise of gayer-than-gay Aussie songwriting legend Peter Allen), the electricity surged. Purely on his magnetism and joy of being onstage, Jackman turned a paper-thin production into a triumph.

Well, they get their wish with *Hugh Jackman: Back On Broadway*. The moment Jackman appears, the

audience relaxes -- this is gonna be fun. It was clear when Jackman strolled onstage in the UK production of *Oklahoma* (his professional breakthrough) that a star was born; you couldn't keep your eyes off of him. Here Jackman begins the show by singing the first lines of "Oh What A Beautiful Morning" from the wings and the audience coos with pleasure. Then he walks out, not as the unassuming Curly but as a star and they roar with applause.

It's a love fest from start to finish. We're all friends so Jackman confesses his Hollywood producers are worried because he needs to bulk up to play Wolverine and the pounds melt off when you do a Broadway show. So he can't dance. He won't dance. Don't ask him. Does he do a medley of songs about dancing? Of course. Does his body refuse his commands and start to dance? You betcha.

Throughout, Jackman makes the Broadhurst feel like a small cabaret. In the matinee performance I attended, he got a lot of mileage out of a sweet little lady in the front row with a sparkly jacket. She started chatting away with him five minutes into the show and Jackman kneeled down to talk with her. Then with perfect aplomb, he said, gee, do you think maybe we should save the rest of this for later? In a Peter Allen medley that opened the second act, he goofily lapdances with a man in the balcony. At another point he pulls a reluctant audience member on stage and teaches the guy how to swivel his hips. Jackman intros the band, drags a bulky crew member from offstage just for fun, gives the chorus girls making their Broadway debut a special bow and gets everyone to sing "Happy Birthday" for one of the gals. It's that kind of show.

As entertainment, it's a pleasure from start to finish. Jackman has an interesting voice. He's not a belter with the best vocals in the world. It has a certain tension in the higher registers that is striking. You sense somehow that Jackman has trained and worked and built up his decent voice with diligence and hard work. Every high note, every big crescendo is earned by sweat and labor and love. It's a change from the easy wow of someone like Liza but it has a charm all its own. Jackman can perform the classic tunes he assays. And when he's allowed to stretch out and do so, he can deliver. His performance of "Soliloquy" from *Carousel* ends Act One on a strong note and that's no mean feat. Jackman hits similar pay dirt when he delivers "Tenterfield Saddler" in Act Two. It ranks somewhere just below "Waltzing Matilda" as an unofficial Aussie anthem and Jackman makes the most of it without overdoing it. (He's an ideal choice among movie stars to play the lead in the new film version of *Les Miserables*.)

But the numerous medleys are far less effective. While Jackman is a triple threat, his voice is the least of it (despite that hard work). When it's a snippet of one tune after another, Jackman can't leave a mark. When he can *act* a song, actually get into the heart of it, he can deliver. But medleys about dancing or his favorite movie musicals or even Allen's pop tunes simply slip by. They're pleasant enough but not memorable the way Liza or Sammy would make them. Jackman needs a story to be at his best.

But you don't complain because he has one other essential ingredient in common with the best entertainers of the past: sincerity. When Jackman brings aboriginal performers onstage to collaborate on a medley of an original tune and "Over The Rainbow" ([done in the style of Iz Kamakawiwo'ole's brilliant take](#)) you never doubt for a moment the gesture comes from the heart. (He and singer Olive Knight of Australia discussed their support for the charity work of [Nomad Two Worlds](#).)

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It took eight years for Jackman to come back to Broadway after his year-long stint in *The Boy From Oz*, even though every producer in town was trying to convince him to return and a revival of *Pal Joey* had his name on it until scheduling or desire just didn't work out. Hopefully we won't have to wait as long for him to get back on the boards in a proper musical. Meanwhile, it's clear Jackman can come back anytime he wants for ten weeks or ten months and deliver the goods in a manner that will keep the customer satisfied. Liza. Sammy. Hugh. Really.

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**Note:** Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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