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# Theater: "In Transit" Should Be Delayed For Track Work; Best Of 2016

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IN TRANSIT \* out of \*\*\*\*

## THE BEST SHOWS OF 2016

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## CIRCLE IN THE SQUARE

This new musical about the lives of New Yorkers criss-crossing paths in the subway system will forever be the answer to the question: what was the first Broadway musical to not feature an orchestra but depend on the actors themselves to provide all the accompaniment. With TV talent shows like *The Sing Off*, dramas like *Glee* and hit films like the *Pitch Perfect* franchise, why not do an a cappella musical? And don't scoff at those precursors: *Pitch Perfect* was a launch pad for current Broadway darling Ben Platt, the star of the acclaimed musical *Dear Evan Hansen* and it's only a matter of time before Lea Michele of *Glee* returns to Broadway. (Though really, what's taking her so long?)

So an a cappella musical? Why not indeed. Unfortunately, that imaginative decision was the last time the people behind *In Transit* seemed to show any creativity. The story and songs are so banal in their cliched characters — a struggling actress hoping for her big break, a gay couple getting married, a hedge fund manager who loses his job — that one realizes very quickly it's going to be a long commute, you're trapped in the subway car and you can't get off. Even worse is the presentation by director and choreographer Kathleen Marshall, a Tony winner who can usually be relied on for at least some witty, inventive ideas. Not here. Not at all. Add in generic costumes and a set that is clunky and cheap and this is a depressing affair for all involved.

It's especially depressing to arrive and see a set that speaks of no imagination, fully on display even before the show begins. You have a rundown ticket booth at one end with two stairs leading down to the subway platform/main stage. A rolling track/sidewalk heads from one side of the theater to the other. And costs were kept so low that when they want to bring some subway car seats or other props onto the stage, you see workmen lugging them towards the rolling track on one end before the prop is locked into place and then

dragged into the spotlight. Adding to the indignity for the actors, at various points they literally must lug the props on and off the rolling platform, lifting them over a lip so they won't be hauled away. I worried for their safety and that a Teamster might come out and fine them for doing unauthorized work.

At the performance I attended, Chesney Snow was the Boxman, a beat-boxing street musician who emceeds the evening, has modest interactions with the main characters as they dash here and there and then offers up a very unnecessary and intrusive monologue towards the end that just underlines the show's cluelessness. Snow's skills are not in doubt, which makes this missed opportunity all the more frustrating.

Did I mention *In Transit* is the first a cappella Broadway musical? That's right, it's the first a cappella Broadway musical! That's pretty cool. No one ever did it before? Amazing! So why is the show so ashamed of this fact? Instead of showcasing the cast by displaying the way they are an ensemble creating this beautiful sound all on their own, everyone is hidden or pushed to the side. Again and again, an uninteresting character steps forth to sing and the other actors fade into the background, hiding backstage or bathed in shadows off to the side. Instead of using their group effort to create a sense of intimacy and versatility, *In Transit* does everything it can to make you forget the one interesting element of the show.

The songs may be awful (truly) and the storylines trite but that shouldn't discount the amazing work by the cast, which is humming and singing and supporting one another almost non-stop. Sometimes they're offstage changing costumes and still fully miked and singing along with whatever is happening on stage. It's a technical marvel and full credit to the seamless sound design of Kevin Travis, the night's true star. Lord knows

I would have had the actors changing costumes on stage and *celebrating* the fact that they were telling this story together, but it's still a real accomplishment.

Mind you, a chorus can sound great together (which is no small feat) without every single person in it worthy of a solo. *In Transit* also suffers from letting cast members take center stage when they really shouldn't vocally. It doesn't help that they're all burdened with generic stories and songs to tell them. Worse, the show is admirably diverse in its casting...but not in its storytelling. The lead characters are all white, with the sole exception of the gay couple who are Asian and mixed race. (A two-fer!) Worse, the people of color are often the MTA employees and street musicians and vendors and hanger-on friends, an unintentional element of the show that's hard not to notice. Nonetheless, Moya Angela makes the most of her hackneyed parts (like a sassy ticket booth worker) and the show's one decent song "A Little Friendly Advice."

You read the impressive credits of most involved and know they can all do much better work with better material — and will in the future. Justin Guarini still awaits a show that makes full use of his genuine appeal and vocal chops. The charming James Snyder of *If/Then*, Margo Seibert of *Rocky*, Telly Leung of *Allegiance*, Angela and the rest all deserve better.

## THE BEST SHOWS OF 2016

Here are my picks for the best shows of 2016. Keep in mind, these are my favorites among the shows I actually saw. Sadly, this year with launching my website about books (sign up for BookFilter's free weekly email newsletter!), I wasn't able to explore as many Off Broadway offerings. And these days, producers are getting more parsimonious and not even offering some major Broadway shows to every critic. (In fairness, with every writer desperate to find a platform to cover shows and the relative ease of launching a blog, the number of people begging for tickets has exploded.) So, while I saw most Broadway shows I wasn't able to see *The Front Page* and only managed to slip into *Shuffle Along* because I forked over my own money to catch it before it closed. (I fear the same is going to happen with Bette Midler in *Hello, Dolly*.)

I've had a silly desire to — for at least one brief shining moment — be able to say I've seen every single show currently running on Broadway. That's how I wrangled my way into *Wicked*, which I'd never seen, missing out on the show's legendary original cast. Now the 9th longest running show in Broadway history, it was the biggest roadblock to that stunt and now I've seen it. It's a classic long-runner and in solid shape. (Once upon a time, long-running shows could fall into neglect, but producer Cameron Macintosh and others realized these almost permanent attractions needed constant attention and careful casting and fine-tuning long after the critics were gone so you are guaranteed to see much better productions for shows like *The Lion King* and *The Book Of Mormon* and *Wicked* than you might have decades ago when having so many long-running hits on Broadway at the same time was less common.) So while I didn't see Idina Menzel and Kristen Chenoweth, I did see *Wicked* with a packed house and finally got to appreciate a strong book by Winnie Holzman (of *My So-Called Life* fame) that is always that much cleverer and nuanced than you expect. Now someone please explain to me why Holzman has done so little in the theater since this smash hit.

Okay, I haven't seen every show on Broadway yet and I didn't see shows like *The Gabriels* at the Public and *Underground Railroad Game* and *Notes From The Field* and *Oslo* and *Indecent* and Taylor Mac's 24 hour extravaganza and numerous other events I regret. (If I was a paid theater critic, of course I would have —but it's a very expensive and time-consuming hobby!) And hey, that's the beauty of theater: it's here and it's gone. You could devote every single night to the theater, there's so much worthy stuff out there. And all is not lost: maybe Nathan Lane will toss me a ticket to his hit show *The Front Page* when demand slows down a tad in the winter. And I can see *Oslo* when it opens on Broadway in the spring!

So don't cry for me — I know how lucky I am to have access to so much great theater. Out of the roughly 80 shows I saw in 2016, here are the new productions (or the productions new to me) that have stayed uppermost in my mind. I link to my original reviews, if any.

1. *Shuffle Along* — What a heartbreaker. When this rapturously reviewed musical announced it was closing before I'd had a chance to see it, I despaired. I really, really wanted to see it but a ticket to a Broadway musical was money I could ill afford. But a friend simply insisted I go and bought me the ticket. Thank God. This musical seemed a misguided mess from the start in terms of scheduling, what with its star Audra McDonald committed to doing a show in London for a few months right after opening. Why didn't they just wait? Probably because it was so challenging to hope the planets align and have so much talent available to be in it at the same time. (And then McDonald got pregnant and they abruptly shuttered it for good.) You've got to do it when you can, I guess, even with people like director George C. Wolfe involved. The result isn't just the best show of 2016, it's a memory I'll cherish forever, the bittersweet heart of live theater — were you there? Did you see it? God it was wonderful and now it's gone.

2. *Boy* — Bobby Steggert giving a sublime performance (as always) in a terrific play presented with care. Steggert is simply one of the best actors working in drama or comedy or musicals but I'm still waiting for the perfect piece to put him over the top on Broadway and cement his leading man status in a big fat hit. This stirring drama about gender (based on a true story first written about in *Rolling Stone*) is an excellent example of what an empathetic, wonderful actor he is. But it's more than just Steggert since *Boy* was given a perfectly realized production from the clever set to the music to the cast surrounding him.

3. *The Band's Visit* — an end of the year treat starring Tony Shalhoub. It will surely transfer at some point for an extended run, but do what you can to see it now at the Atlantic. (And what a year for Atlantic, which has this and *Skeleton Crew* and *Hold On To Me Darling* as highlights of the year. Maybe it's time to subscribe?)

4. *Familiar* — actress and playwright Danai Gurira (of *The Walking Dead*) enjoyed a huge success with her Broadway play *Eclipsed*. That clearly wasn't a fluke because this excellent family drama was even better, blessed with an excellent ensemble. The story of a tight-knit family facing a wedding (a recipe for drama and comedy in any home), *Familiar* takes off when the eldest daughter (born and raised in the US) insists on following traditional rituals of Zimbabwe that should lead up to the ceremony. Hilarious, affecting and ending on a beautiful note, this is the work of a major talent and a real success for Playwrights Horizons. I wish this had been the one to make it to Broadway instead of the more somber *Eclipsed*. Hopefully wise producers will

be mounting this all over the country in regional productions, it's a crowd-pleaser with a lot on its mind.

5. *Hadestown* — Here's another show that simply must have a future life beyond what was a frustratingly short run at New York Theatre Workshop. (I kept wanting to send people to see it.) Based on a terrific song cycle by Ana s Mitchell, she and director Rachel Chavkin created a wonderful staging of this update of the myth of Orpheus & Eurydice. Like Chavkin's *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet Of 1812*, it takes place all around the audience, making you feel like you're a part of the story that transcends stunt and the trendy immersive theater to create a communal sense of storytelling that makes the tale of young lovers trapped in the underworld all the more affecting. Patrick Page as the compelling Boss of the Underworld (a man who dearly loves industrialization) was merely the best of a terrific group of performers in *Hadestown*. You can buy an original cast EP online at Mitchell's website, but oh how I want to see this again. Perhaps at Circle In The Square, the perfect Broadway space for this show. Timely, timeless and above all filled with great songs to bring an enduring tale to life.

6. *Germinal* — Forget *The Encounter*. Here's the year's cleverest use of technology to engage and entertain. I saw it at last year's Under The Radar Festival at the Public, which features great shows from around the world at affordable prices. Start booking shows for this January while you still can!

7. *Mouse: The Persistence Of An Unlikely Thought* — Daniel Kitson is one of the boldest, most interesting talents working in the theater today. And his email newsletters alerting you to upcoming shows are funny, too. See him whenever and wherever you can, whether doing stand-up or the "story shows" like *Mouse*. Read my absurdly enthusiastic review to get a better sense of the Kitsonian thing that Kitson does.

8-10. *Skeleton Crew*/*The Robber Bridegroom*/*Hold On To Me Darling* — I tend to be conservative in my reviews. If I give a show 3 1/2 stars out of 4, it's because I'm certain the show will be on my best of the year list. I almost never give a show 4 stars (though I did with *Boy*, above) because a show has to be perfect in every way to earn that. I'd much rather give a very good show three stars and upgrade it down the road rather than over-praise and have to revise downwards. Sometimes I get to see a show twice. More often, it just lingers in my mind while my appreciation grows. That's the case for these three shows. *Skeleton Crew* had an excellent ensemble and captured the insecurity of people working on a factory floor with intelligence and humanity while delivering a knock-out story. *The Robber Bridegroom* was just a blast of fun with director Alex Timbers displaying fluid cleverness while Steven Pasquale charmed the socks of each and every member of the audience. Kenneth Lonergan shook off whatever nightmare he was in and created *Hold On To Me Darling*, one of the best plays of the year and *Manchester By The Sea*, one of the best films of the year. Timothy Olyphant was a treat as a country star looking (sort of) for an escape from his fame by returning back home. While this show is a shaggy comedy and *Manchester* a heartbreaking drama, they both share an expansive warmth for people in all their complicated, contradictory humanity. I sorely wish I could have seen all three of them more than once for I've no doubt my initial positive feelings would have only deepened.

11. *Broadway By The Year: The 1950s* — impresario Scott Siegel has been showcasing major Broadway and cabaret talent at Town Hall for years. His signature production is *Broadway By The Year*, which is always a

treat whether it focuses on an individual year or decade or whatever new way he discovers for shining a spotlight on great tunes. You're sure to see famed talent and discover newcomers you'll want to keep an eye out for. This evening was no exception, introducing me to people like Jim Brochu and Lisa Howard and Luke Hawkins and letting me spend time again with the great Marilyn Maye. Buy your tickets for next season now.

I also savored:

Ben Platt delivering a star-making turn in Dear Evan Hansen

The gorgeous make-over of the Imperial for Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812

The terrific all-female ensemble for The Wolves

Following the storyline of talented actor and dancer Jeff Sykes throughout the sexy interactive show The Grand Paradise (often in a show, you find yourself wanting to see more of this actress or that actor or preferring one storyline to another — with interactive shows, you can indulge your curiosity to your heart's content)

Making my first journey to the beautiful space of Two Rivers Theater in Red Bank, New Jersey to catch a strong production of August Wilson's Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

Getting to see a superior revival of The Death Of The Last Black Man In The Whole Entire World at Signature...and then getting to see playwright Suzan-Lori Parks jam with her band in the lobby. (That was fun! Now please get back to working on your epic When Father Comes Home From The Wars!)

The scene-stealing — but sympathetic and purposeful — set by Laura Jellinek for A Life, a show anchored by David Hyde Pierce's typically self-effacing and charming performance

Finally getting to see the delightful cream puff of a musical that is She Loves Me

Discovering the very talented Jacques Coliman by buying a last-minute discount ticket to a Sunday night performance of Duat. Thank you Soho Rep for the audience friendly pricing on early previews!

The opportunity for a return visit to Bedlam's Sense & Sensibility, one of my favorite shows from 2015

## **THEATER OF 2016**

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) \*\*\*

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) \*\*\* 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein \*\* 1/2

Skeleton Crew \*\*\*

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) \*\* but \*\*\* if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise \*\*\*

Our Mother's Brief Affair \* 1/2

Something Rotten \*\*\*

Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) \*\*\* 1/2

Broadway & The Bard \* 1/2

Prodigal Son \*\*

A Bronx Tale: The Musical \*\*

Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) \*\*

Nice Fish \*\*\*

Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall \*\*\*

Hughie \*\*

Pericles (w Christian Camargo) \* 1/2

Straight \*\* 1/2

Eclipsed \*\*\*

Red Speedo \*\*\*

The Royale \*\* 1/2

Boy \*\*\*\*

The Robber Bridegroom \*\*\*

Hold On To Me, Darling \*\*\*

Blackbird \*\* 1/2

Disaster! \*

The Effect \*\* 1/2

Dry Powder \*\* 1/2

Head Of Passes \*\* 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1950s \*\*\* 1/2

*Familiar* \*\*\* 1/2

The Crucible (w Ben Whishaw) \*\*\*

Bright Star \*\*

She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) \*\*\*

Antlia Pneumatica \*\* 1/2

RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) \*\* 1/2

RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) \*\*\*

RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) \*\* 1/2

Nathan The Wise \*\* 1/2

The Father \*\*

American Psycho \*\*

Waitress \*\* 1/2

Fully Committed \*\* 1/2

Long Day's Journey Into Night \*\*\*

A Streetcar Named Desire (w Gillian Anderson) \*\*\*

Tuck Everlasting \*\*

War \*\*



Paramour \* 1/2

*Hadestown* (NYTW) \*\*\* 1/2

Troilus & Cressida (Shakespeare in the Park) \*\* 1/2

Cats (on Broadway, 2016 revival) \*\*

The Encounter (Complicite on Broadway) \*\*

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (at Two River Theater) \*\*\*

Oh, Hello \*\* 1/2

Heisenberg \*\* 1/2

The Dudleys \*\* 1/2

Holiday Inn \* 1/2

A Life \*\* 1/2

Love Love Love \*\* 1/2

The Radicalization Of Rolfe (FringeFest NYC) \*\* 1/2

Sweat \* 1/2

The Death of The Last Black Man In The Whole Entire World aka The Negro Book Of The Dead \*\*\*

Falsettos \*\*

Dead Poets Society \*\* 1/2

Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812 \*\*\* (but \*\* 1/2 if you've seen it before)

Sweet Charity (w Sutton Foster) \*\*

Mouse: The Persistence Of An Unlikely Thought \*\*\* 1/2

Dear Evan Hansen \*\*\*

The Illusionists: Turn Of The Century \*\*

The Bodyguard \*\*

The Wolves \*\*\*

The Band's Visit \*\*\* 1/2

*In Transit* \* out of \*\*\*\*

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If you don't register and vote, you don't get to complain.

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***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.***