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Theater: Kevin Kline Soars, "Amélie" Bores, "Casablanca" In Frame, "The Play That Goes Wrong" Proves All Too True To Its Name

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PRESENT LAUGHTER *** out of ****

CASABLANCABOX ** 1/2 out of ****

AMÉLIE * 1/2 out of ****

THE PLAY THAT GOES WRONG ** out of ****

PRESENT LAUGHTER *** out of ****

ST. JAMES THEATRE

Is No I Coward difficult to pull off or simply not that good? After two unsatisfying revivals of *Private Lives*, I was beginning to believe Coward's three-act drawing room comedies did not stand the test of time. Commercially, Coward has enjoyed only one out and out smash on Broadway: the original run of *Blithe Spirit* which ran for a year and a half during WW II. (What a pity we won't see Angela Lansbury's *Madame Arcati*.) The rest — even with Coward playing the lead — have been decidedly limited runs, from *The Vortex* in 1925 (with Coward writing and directing and starring) to 2011's *Private Lives* with Kim Cattrall.

But hold on! Here is the urbane and witty Kevin Kline, who can score laughter simply by donning a dressing gown. With Kline and a mostly superlative cast led by director Moritz Von Stuelpnagel, you can relax. They don't rethink or reimagine or modernize Coward, who is quite modern to begin with, thank you very much. They simply do the play very well.

Before the curtain rose, the bar area was positively bustling; as the bartender made clear, this is the sort of show where people like to have a drink. (In London, everyone drinks at *every* show and the bar is thronged during the interval; in the US, a good trade in liquor is far less common.) A little bubbly never hurt anyone but I'm almost certain the champagne I had to kick off the evening didn't influence my opinion. I had one glass

and thought it was a very fun night. My guest had — horrors — water and yet felt the same. If I'd had another glass at intermission, perhaps I might have thought this was one of the best shows of the year, but we'll never know.

The set by David Zinn is the sturdy, old-fashioned sort: if you want to evoke the Manhattan home of a successful Broadway star, well, just build yourself a lovely two floor set with a curved staircase, several doors for farce-like entrances and exits, fill it with books and modern art and of course a drink cart. Done!

The play is equally sturdy. Kline is Garry Essendine, a light comedy star of the first order, preparing for a tour of Africa. His life is hectic, glamorous and perhaps a bit lonely. A pretty young thing named Daphne apparently spent the night (in the guest room, you naughty reader) though he can't remember her name. Daphne (Tedra Millan of *The Wolves*) is besotted of course and doesn't mind a *bit* that he's twice her age, though he does mind very much when she mentions this.

In pops Garry's dependable secretary (the dependably amusing Kristine Nielsen), a surly cook (Ellen Harvey), a slightly mad young playwright looking for advice (Bhavesh Patel), an almost ex-wife (Kate Burton) still involved in his career, friends, hangers-on and Joanna, the distressingly beautiful new wife of his producer Henry (Cobie Smulders and Peter Francis James, respectively). A lot of nonsense ensues.

With three acts and every opportunity for mugging, it might have grown tiresome. Instead, it's a treat — thank most everyone in the ensemble. Kate Burton played Daphne in a 1982 revival and I imagine she was just as

much a treat then as she is now as Garry's voice-of-reason wife. Nielsen makes much out of very little and pretty much everyone else follows suit. The lone exception is Patel as the playwright, who takes everything at a fever pitch, chewing the scenery and delivering broad, broad comedy when the rest keep it droll and sophisticated.

Kline cannot be a revelation, of course, not at this stage of his career. But what a treat to see him in such fine form. He had all of two minor slips. At the very start he does a modest bit of slapstick coming down the stairs that is entirely out of character from the rest of the show. At the end, his final scene with Burton deserved an extra layer of complexity. As soon as he says "Darling" we know what happy finale to expect, but a chance for a brief glimmer of deeper emotion was there to be mined. These two very brief moments are easy to spot since he's so sublimely amusing at every other point in the show.

Kline is matched by Cobie Smulders, who is *indeed* a revelation in her Broadway debut. I've enjoyed her tremendously from the very start of the series *How I Met Your Mother*, which was an ok sitcom with a great ensemble. Smulders showed her versatility and charm throughout its nine season run. Seeing her wasted in *The Avengers* movies, I feared her potential for real chops was being overshadowed by her physical charms. Didn't people realize how talented she is? Happily, here she is making her Broadway debut and knocking it out of the park. Smulders plays the difficult to pin down Joanna with aplomb. A lesser actress might turn Joanna into a stock villain but you never know how to think of her with Smulders on stage. She delivers a fine British accent, holds her own with Kline and Burton and everyone else (no mean feat), plays the part with subtlety, demonstrates terrific stage presence and creates a character you are alternately charmed by and suspicious of — exactly as it calls for.

This *Present Laughter* reaches real greatness when it pivots from matters of the heart (everyone is sleeping with everyone else) to the *real* crisis: which theater our hero's next comedy is going to play in. Smulders is forced to exit amidst this new emergency and her dramatic farewell is simply ignored while the rest argue over what truly matters: the theater! Her character pops back in — rather distraught at being ignored — and again announces loudly that she's going to leave, a bit of comic business that Smulders pulls off beautifully. It's an exit I won't forget in a Broadway debut that should be remembered.

CASABLANCABOX ** 1/2 out of ****

HERE

Actually, Ronald Reagan was never really cast in *Casablanca*. The announcement that he would star in the upcoming Warner Bros. film was just a bit of press puffery to bring attention to the B-movie actor's newest movie hitting theaters. Studio flacks often placed these bits of made-up "news" just to make rising stars seem important or stroke an ego and the such. Rick was always going to be played by Humphrey Bogart, at least as far as everyone except the star himself was concerned.

I learned that from *We'll Always Have Casablanca*, the latest book to dissect the making of one of Hollywood's

greatest films. Yes, “latest,” since *Casablanca* had such a famously turbulent history — no one involved thought they were making even a good movie, much less a great one — that it’s hard to resist retelling the story of how it happened. Bogie and Ingrid Bergman became stars for good, Dooley Wilson had the role of a lifetime and one of the rare early parts for a black man in a major Hollywood film of the 1940s that was equal in stature and humanity to his co-stars, the cast and crew were filled with refugees fleeing the Nazi onslaught and the film had a ripped-from-the-headlines nature combined with patriotic uplift so compelling it can send chills down your spine even today. Oh and it’s wonderfully funny, adult, optimistic, cynical and romantic all at the same time. And while they were making it, no one knew exactly how it was going to end.

So no wonder writer Sara Farrington and director Reid Farrington have spent several years working on *CasablancaBox*, a technically challenging, wildly ambitious project that wants to show the film being made, tell the backstories of numerous colorful characters (from the drug-addicted Peter Lorre to the failing marriage of Bergman) and have fun bringing various drafts for that famous ending to life.

On the practical level of figuring out exactly how to do this, they and their 16-member cast and an equally inventive crew have succeeded admirably. It’s a little hard to describe but easy to watch. Essentially, we are on the set watching the film being made. Screenwriters bicker over drafts, actors ask for their motivations, director Michael Curtiz scoots away for “massages” from comely assistants and every once in a while they act out a scene we recognize.

But this is a multi-media effort — they combine footage of the film with actors on stage acting out the scene at hand in varied ways. Sometimes, you can see the person on stage doing a scene while the same footage from the film appears in front of them on a screen held up by a crew member. You watch an actress do a scene while Bergman’s luminous face floats in front of her. Tracking shots involve actors walking across the stage while a crew member walks alongside them, holding up a white square so, say, the image of Claude Rains can walk and talk along with them.

Sometimes the actor on stage is saying the lines of dialogue while other times you’re hearing the soundtrack from the film and the actor just mouths the words. Still, other times, an actor on stage might share a scene with an actor in the real film. Sometimes footage from the movie is displayed *behind* them. And quite often they’re surrounded by the director and actors watching off-camera, while crew members hold live mics over their heads to catch the dialogue. It’s head-spinningly difficult to imagine pulling off and yet they succeed with only minor snafus. Indeed, before the show begins you can see the stage is filled with so many bits of tape laid out on the floor in so many colors to indicate where various people should stand at various moments that it looks like some mad stab at modern art.



Photo © Benjamin Heller

Where the show falters is in tone and purpose. Time and again, when they simply show actors working on scenes or trying out one of the bits cut from the final film, it works. Time and again, it fails when bluntly offering up some of the backstories that make the story of *Casablanca's* making so rich. Toussaint Jeanlouis has an engaging presence as Dooley Wilson/Sam, but even he can't bring to life blunt exposition that lays out exactly why Sam is such a good part in terms of the depiction of black men on film. That's one of many examples but at least it involves two people talking on set. When the script veers off from the reality of on-set mayhem, it falters even more.

Most glaringly, Rob Hille as Peter Lorre is given an absurd, Gollum-like scene where he must wrestle and argue with himself over the lure of taking morphine to achieve his performance. Not only is it dreadful as written, it's completely at odds stylistically with most of the play. The audience is already being asked to keep track of when they're watching actors and crew in real life versus when they're rehearsing versus when they're actually shooting the scenes for real. It's a huge mistake to add yet another layer of unreality.

Reality is also broken when a stage hand suddenly addresses the theater directly about the horrors of Poland when invaded by the Nazis. It's suggested as a close-up in a way, but this doesn't work. Neither does the scene where Bergman is suddenly jumping back and forth between a boring night at home with her husband versus a thrilling discussion of neo-realism with director Roberto Rossellini. Maybe Bogie's wife Mayo (Erin Treadway) really *did* pull a gun on him! (In real life, she was a paranoid drunk, stabbed him with a knife, set

their house on fire and attempted suicide several times.) But the moment where they went over his lines was one of the show's best until it tilted into melodrama. If she'd just said quietly that she knew he was leaving her rather than shouting it and threatening to kill him, that emotional power would have been all the stronger.

When they keep it simple and show everyone working to make *Casablanca*, the piece works. Roger Casey is terrific as Bogie and everyone should take a cue from his performance: he "does" Bogie only when doing his scenes and skips the voice in real life. Catherine Gowl is his match as Bergman and Stephanie Regina pulls off a complex turn as the Girl Friday Irene *and* the narrator filling in the plot of both the movie and its production history. Adam Patterson is very appealing in multiple roles, including actor Conrad Viedt and scriptwriter Philip Epstein. Kyle Stockburger gets laughs simply by holding out his arms to suggest the girth of actor Sydney Greenstreet. Gabriella Rhodeen has great fun as the step-daughter of studio chief Jack Warner, looking a little dazed in her one big scene. And the song "Knock On Wood" is played off perfectly. There's a lot to like.

So just lower the temperature. The on-set bustle should be used less often to have maximum impact. (The traffic jam nature of a film set eventually just proved distracting, keeping us from focusing on some key moments.) Let the refugee bitching about his small role simply *bitch*, rather than seem ready to tear down the set in a volcanic rage, for example. Calm down director Michael Curtiz while you're at it. Remove the blunt delivery of facts.

Numerous small details charm, such as the way the actors jump in the air and shift their bodies to accommodate a new camera angle. (It made me smile every time.) Perhaps this project is a little like an over-stuffed biography: sometimes a writer learns so many interesting facts about their subject that they want to include them all. And yes, it's all interesting and maybe some of the elements I criticized really happened. But that doesn't mean you *have* to include them. Pare down the extraneous and this intriguingly complex production could be not just a fun curio for ardent fans of *Casablanca* but a work of art in its own right.

AMÉLIE * 1/2 out of ****

WALTER KERR THEATRE

Well, they couldn't win, really. The film *Amélie* was a very curious choice to turn into a piece of theater, since the movie's entire appeal rested on the frenetic camerawork, the star-making performance of Audrey Tautou and the hard to describe Frenchness at its very core. The musical *Amélie* avoids all three. While it's still set in Paris, the songs and score stubbornly avoid sounding French in the least. Accordions? Never! When someone seems to slip up and says "Madame" or "Monsieur," you're almost startled. "Oh, right, we're in France," you think. Of course turning *Amélie* into a musical and trying to avoid seeming French is like turning John Ford's classic *The Quiet Man* into a musical and banishing anything Irish and the color green for good measure. You can admire the foolish stance even as you shake your head and think, "but why?"

Yet the question of accordions or French-ness is moot. You could have the ushers wearing berets, smoking

Gauloises and handing out fresh croissants to the entire audience and it wouldn't have mattered. A musical without good tunes won't work, no matter where it's set or how the music is arranged. Stars Phillipa Soo and Adam Chanler-Berat can sing very well but you wouldn't know it from the ungainly melodies they're asked to tackle in the songs by Nathan Tysen and Daniel Messé. I assume the rest of the cast can sing well, too, but I couldn't swear to it, from Savvy Crawford's awkward opening numbers to the finale.

The book by Craig Lucas is faithful to the movie in every detail except the one that matters: its spirit. *Amélie* needed to be completely rethought if it was going to be put on the stage (*if* it was going to be put on the stage). Instead, they seem to have made the wrong choice at every turn. In the film, a garden gnome provides an amusing montage when it's taken around the world by a flight attendant and posed in front of famous attractions. On stage, the gnome comes to life and turns into that tired cliché of a lecherous dwarf. In the film, Amélie is startled by the death of Princess Diana. Onstage, that becomes an excuse to mount a big fantasy number performed by "Elton John" which jolts the audience awake but is a pure time-killer with no dramatic purpose. One of Amélie's co-workers is a hypochondriac. Fine, but while she can sing about it in her first number, does she have to keep making medical references during a climactic musical moment in the show's romance? Yes, one can see how the moments in the film led to the moments on stage, but they shouldn't have.

Let's face it: Amélie is a strange, sad creature. But in the film she's surrounded by a cast of eccentrics in a very real and specific place. Onstage, they seem merely odd and utterly unrooted, so fierce is the desire to avoid seeming too French, too particular. While Soo can rightly boast she was in the world premiere of

Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812 as well as the legendary original cast of *Hamilton*, she does not display the star-power that this role desperately needs. That's not quite fair since no one could bring this story as written to life. Still, the charming Chanler-Berat does bring us in more, does make us believe this artist is caught up in the romance of his secret admirer. He doesn't have a single good song to sing (his key number "When The Booth Goes Bright" is not felicitous in lyric or melody) but the rare moments he is center stage hold our attention a little better and make Soo's character more appealing as well.

C'est la vie. It's not very French or very musical. Instead of making you rush back to the film it makes you wonder if that's even worth doing. But at least they kept the color red.

THE PLAY THAT GOES WRONG ** out of ****

LYCEUM THEATRE

It's obvious we're in trouble from the very start when director Chris Bean (Henry Shields) comes out to introduce a performance of *The Murder At Haversham Manor*. It's all nonsense of course, since we know *The Play That Goes Wrong* is about a drama society staging an Agatha Christie-like mystery in which everything does indeed go wrong. Stagehands have been running around the set hammering this and that as we file in, with props falling apart and actors looking frantic and so on. It's mayhem! Except it's not. Bean mentions previous ill-fated productions and the delivery of Shields is so drawn-out and ponderous — underlining and italicizing every joke well before they land — that one despairs even before the thing has rightly begun.

If you're thinking of Michael Frayn's brilliant farce *Noises Off*, don't. Think rather of the West End's permanent tourist lure *The Mousetrap*, which is exactly the type of play they're mocking here. But the joke is on them since *The Mousetrap* is a dusty relic that creaks along with little effort and less imagination and *The Play That Goes Wrong* is its counterpart in every way. It's *Noises Off* without the clever bits.

Still, one does giggle a little and full credit to actors Henry Lewis, Jonathan Sayer and Henry Shields for conceiving this show, writing and starring in it and turning their success into a minor cottage industry of light comedies. Carry on, gentlemen!

The Mischief Theatre company has followed up this smash London hit with *The Comedy About A Bank Robbery*, *Peter Pan Goes Wrong* and *Lights! Camera! Improvise!* Perhaps the modest bits that work here have been improved upon? One can hope the shows are more imaginative than their titles.

Quite simply, it simply isn't funny to have sets fall down. You don't need the elaborate backstory supplied in *Noises Off*. But you do need characters who seem aware of the disaster they're in and are trying to figure a way out of the mess. Too often here, the actors don't try to do what any sane person might do when things are going wrong. You think "why not do this?" but they don't do this or that or even the other thing. They just carry on and that's not amusing. It's much more fun when you sense the real person struggling with disaster, when you see them try something you might have tried and then see how they get frustrated in the attempt and then try something else and get frustrated again.

With *The Play That Goes Wrong*, all we get are punchlines with no set-up, characters without character. Henry Lewis for example has a very funny, commanding voice and gets some laughs simply with his delivery. Like everyone else, he puts his all into the foolishness on hand. But it's not rooted in anything. We laughed as kids when something went wrong on *The Carol Burnett Show* because we saw the actors trying not to laugh. Here, we don't know the "actors" (that is, the characters trapped in this disastrous performance) and they don't seem to be reacting to what's going on beyond what's absolutely necessary and so, where's the fun in that?

For example, early on a bottle of whiskey is mistakenly replaced with a bottle of paint thinner — it's labeled PAINT THINNER so the punters in the back won't miss the gag. Everyone on stage is then poured a glass of "whiskey" and they each in turn spew it out. (Lewis is an especially good spewer.) I'm an easy laugh and I laughed. Good job! But then they're poured another drink and another and then another throughout the show and they grimly down it every time and then spit it out. That. Is. Not. Funny. Trying to replace the bottle with water while someone else mistakenly puts it back? Funny. Watching each actor deal with the problem in a different way? (Perhaps pretending to drink or pouring it into the next person's glass or what have you?) Funny. Getting progressively angrier and angrier at the person pouring drinks or trying to refuse but somehow failing or *anything* would be funnier than having to believe even amateur actors in a drama society would really keep swallowing paint thinner again and again against all logic. This is Comedy 101 and they fail.

Not always, mind you — sometimes real characters of a sort appear, almost as if by accident. Dave Hearn creates a lovable dimwit, a fellow who gets awfully pleased by applause and claps along with the audience.

When things go wrong, he goes along with relish — we know this character, we can see him actually reacting to the unfolding disaster in a consistent, amusingly blithe manner and so he gets the best laughs of the night.

Similarly, two female characters (played gamely by Charlie Russell and Bryony Corrigan — indeed, everyone is game) end up on stage playing the same role at the same time. When they each decide they want to take over the part and try and shoulder aside the other, lo and behold they have some motivation! They push and body slam each other and it's not just nonsense but an actual, purposeful action to accomplish a goal and we're not merely watching things fall over but enjoying two characters as they fight for supremacy. What a relief! At least sometimes in *The Play That Goes Wrong*, something goes right.

Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

The Liar *** 1/2

Jitney *** 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) *** 1/2

Significant Other * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) ** (third visit, but *** if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) ** 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) *** 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) ****

The Light Years * 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) *** 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips **

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) *

Come From Away *

Miss Saigon **

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba * 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s **

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) ***

Latin History For Morons * 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

Casablancabox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

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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.