

Theater: 'Lady Day' Sings; Steven Soderbergh Slips

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LADY DAY AT EMERSON'S BAR & GRILL *** out of ****

THE LIBRARY ** out of ****

SOUTH PACIFIC ** 1/2 out of ****

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CIRCLE IN THE SQUARE

Audra McDonald? Playing the role of Billie Holiday? Like the rest of the theater world, that struck me as the most bizarre, unlikely casting I'd heard of since Bernadette Peters was playing Annie Oakley. McDonald can do anything, but Billie Holiday? Really? McDonald's voice famously glides between Broadway and opera. Even in Porgy & Bess or her solo albums, she's never come within a mile of jazz singing. How crazily misguided can you get?

Well, not so crazy. The moment McDonald begins to sing, you wonder where the heck this sound has been hiding. If an unknown steps up and sings Janis Joplin, you can admire how well they perform the songs, but not be astonished that their voice sounds like that legendary singer. It happens. But when a multiple Tony-winning artist who has performed so many different parts suddenly sings in a voice nothing like you've ever heard before, it's pretty astonishing.

Let's be clear: she is imitating Holiday down to a "t." This isn't McDonald putting her own spin on songs in the vein of Holiday, the way Dee Dee Bridgewater recently did in her own bio-play about the great jazz singer. This is McDonald as Holiday, the same way Ben Kingsley inhabited Gandhi or Michelle Williams did the same with Marilyn Monroe or other artists have embodied Winston Churchill and countless other legendary figures on stage and film. Done on a surface level, it's just mimicry, a pale copy of the original. Done on a cellular level the way McDonald does here, it brings this artist to life again. She elevates what is inevitably a pedestrian excuse to share some anecdotes and -- far more importantly -- sing some songs. The show itself is nothing special, but McDonald's performance makes it eminently worthwhile.

Bridgewater did much the same recently off Broadway. That show used a rehearsal and an evening's performance as an excuse for Holiday to shoehorn the story of her life while chatting with the boys in the band and sneaking some drinks. It was a hoary device and the machinery never stopped creaking. In contrast, this bio-musical depicts a straightforward night club appearance by Holiday months before she would die in July of 1959. Stories are told but there's no desperate attempt to chart Holiday's entire life and the result for much of the show is a far more natural affair, where character is revealed casually and tellingly.

Holiday comes out in a lovely white gown, launches into "I Wonder Where Our Love Has Gone" and we're off. The way she manipulates her jaw (does it hurt?), slurs the words a la Holiday, tells jokes and slowly, all too predictably disintegrates is made fascinating by McDonald. Her voice, by the way, is not the broken down beauty of Holiday at the end of her life. It's more like Holiday at the peak of her powers, when she was recording for Decca. The dark shading is there, but any loss of range is more than compensated for by Holiday's masterful phrasing. The truth is that at least on recordings, her voice was a ravaged shell of its former self by 1959. It was like a grand old estate with the roof caved in, the windows busted, and nature slowly reclaiming the structure for itself. That voice still had a faded majesty, but it was as much for the hints of what it used to be as anything else.

(Not to say Lady In Satin isn't marvelous....)

McDonald isn't so perverse as to croak like that. She performs "What A Little Moonlight Can Do," "Crazy He Calls Me," "God Bless The Child" and more with passion and conviction and a swinging self-assurance that is both perfectly in character (she's singing as Holiday, not McDonald) and satisfying on its own. Nothing in the show will surprise you for a moment other than her singing style, but surely that's what you came for?

But about the show. It sets the scene so effectively that the real goal of such an evening -- to make you feel like you really have stepped in a time machine and are watching a great artist at work -- is achieved for a while. Then playwright Lanie Robertson blows it by getting heavy-handed. A moment where Holiday must pause for a second and turns her back to the crowd is all the drama we need -- Holiday's anguish and pride and humor come through every song loud and clear. But this subtle emotion is squandered when Holiday wanders off stage to do some heroin. She returns sleepy-eyed and slurring her lyrics even more than usual, nodding off in the middle of half-remembered anecdotes.

But in case we still aren't sure what's been going on, her long-sleeved glove is shoved up towards her wrist, needle marks dot her arm and blood is marking a trail of tears. This sledge-hammer approach turns the final scenes into pathos as Holiday tumbles off the stage and can barely get through any more numbers. It's a deeply unsatisfying turn, no matter how "true" the details may be.

This lack of confidence in the central conceit is reflected in the set design of James Noone. It makes great use of Circle In The Square, putting a bar and tables on the stage where audience members sit and drink while Holiday wanders among them. (You definitely want to sit there if you can.) Great. Unfortunately, they also feel obliged to add hokey touches like Victrolas that float in the air behind Holiday and ghostly photos of the important people in her life that appear on the wall behind her. Every such gesture pulls us out of the idea that we're in a nightclub watching Holiday and is utterly pointless to boot. Do we really need to see what the great Lester Young looks like?

On the plus side, Esosa has McDonald looking glorious in a lovely white gown and the lighting by Robert Wierzel and sound by Steve Canyon Kennedy is very effective, moving in close on McDonald at dramatic high points (like "Strange Fruit") with a tight spotlight and (I believe) bringing her voice slightly higher in the mix as compared to scenes where she is wandering through the audience. Simple and effective. Director Lonny Price has paced the show well. It's a pity they didn't cut the dramatics and let Holiday be Holiday. Nonetheless, for much of this brief, engaging evening, McDonald delivers her spirit and more importantly her songs with the loose, improvisational greatness that was Holiday.

It's tantalizing to imagine how this show might send McDonald off into a new jazzy looseness on other appropriate roles. Certainly, jazzy is not a word I ever associated with her before. But apparently, McDonald can do anything, as she proves again here.

THE LIBRARY ** out of ****
THE PUBLIC THEATER

Anyone following the career of Steven Soderbergh knows that he is constantly challenging himself. In film, Soderbergh has tackled all manner of genre and style, from one-man documentary style performance pieces to popcorn flicks like Ocean's Eleven. It's the one through-line in a seemingly random career that has ping-ponged from one project to another. Now he's moved into TV and theater, insisting he's bored with film. That could be theater's gain if Soderbergh continues his foray into this art form.

Unfortunately, his latest directorial effort on stage is based on a dramatically flat spin on the Columbine high school massacre. Longtime collaborator Scott Z. Burns took a real-life incident from that terrible day and spun off this story. I'm not remotely surprised Burns took inspiration from this footnote to that crime because it

fascinated me too. In real life, one of the killers was stalking students in the library. A girl silently praying was shot in the head and killed instantly. A few minutes later, another girl was asked if she believed in God since she had blurted out "Oh God, help me." Quite reasonably, she said "no" and then "yes," desperately trying to tell this lunatic whatever he wanted to hear. He just walked away, saying "God is gay" but didn't kill her.

However, their back and forth was subsequently and wrongly attributed to the girl who had been praying silently and was shot in the head and killed without saying a word to the killer. She became a martyr in the eyes of many who heard this fanciful tale: songs were written about her, her story was passed around on the internet as inspiring and the bereaved mother of the girl published a memoir about her daughter as a Christian martyr titled *She Said Yes*.

I go into detail because this story fascinated me when it became incontrovertibly clear what really happened. In essence, no one cared it wasn't true. People kept repeating the story even though a thorough investigation detailing the attack minute by minute clearly ruled it out. The story continued to circle the internet. A young relative of mine wrote an essay about this girl and her inspiring Christian faith and when I pointed out to her parents it wasn't true, they seemed nonplussed and saw no reason to correct their daughter. What harm would it do to believe this? And you can imagine the delicately awkward situation of the survivor. Who would want to add to the pain of a grieving mother? Who would want to take away the one shred of comfort she had latched onto: the false idea that her daughter had been a martyr for her faith? And yet, it wasn't true.

Here's Soderbergh discussing *The Library* with Charlie Rose.

Burns was clearly intrigued by this moral dilemma as well. But after earlier drafts sticking closer to the Columbine event, he spun off a wholly fictional tale that tries to up the stakes dramatically. In this case, Caitlin (Chloe Grace Moretz) has survived a school shooting and remains oblivious for a while about what people are saying. Instead of someone else being attributed with her saying yes she believes in God, Caitlin is horrified to hear that the media is reporting that she told the killers where some people were hiding and was thus spared while all the others she "snitched" on were killed.

Unfortunately, this isn't remotely as interesting a moral dilemma. Caitlin has no reason to be quiet -- of course she's going to try and prove her innocence. And we really never doubt her, even though the police and her parents and friends and neighbors and seemingly the rest of the world never believe her for a moment. So Caitlin has no reason NOT to challenge a man of the cloth using her as an example of lack of faith. She has no reason NOT to ask the mother of the "martyred" girl to stop saying Caitlin failed this moral test. *The Library* becomes a banal mystery where we wait for everyone else to realize what we've instinctively understood from the beginning: Caitlin is telling the truth. It's not a moral dilemma, just a weak Law & Order episode where even minimal police work might have raised doubt about her guilt from the start.

Under the circumstances, Moretz does a very convincing job as Caitlin, waking up from the nightmare of a shooting to the nightmare of having no one believe her. It doesn't help that she's been hiding some facts about vaguely knowing the killer beforehand. While the show does a decent job of showing the media firestorm and how quickly rumor becomes fact once it's been repeated on the evening news, I don't think it was attempting to denounce this so much as simply describe it. When the mother of the martyred girl (Lili Taylor) shows a savviness about TV movie rights when talking to a publisher, it didn't feel like a condemnation of her sincerity but just a reflection of how even newbies just rescued from a natural disaster know their parts when news cameras are rolling. In fact, I thought Taylor's underwritten part was actually pretty decent and understanding, given that the entire world was telling her that Caitlin was badmouthing her dead daughter over guilt about revealing the hiding place of schoolmates.

But other than Moretz, only Tamara Tunie as a detective investigating the crime struck me as a fully rounded character I believed in. Everyone else felt sketchy and unconvincing. Soderbergh directed capably and the sets

by Riccardo Hernandez and lighting by David Lander are initially striking. (The set feels more like a morgue or a futuristic hospital setting than anything else.) But the already shaky play by Burns takes a thuddingly banal turn at the end and all the other tech elements follow suit.

The play ends with the members of the cast quoting from the final report. One scene earlier, we saw a student being walked through the library by the detective (why, we wonder, wasn't this done before?) when she suddenly realizes he's confused about who was standing where and has made a terrible, terrible mistake. It's not wildly affecting, but it is dramatic. But to follow that with a banal reading of the report -- whose only purpose is to make clear Caitlin was telling the truth -- becomes a tiresome repetition of facts. The play is not about the massacre, as such, so why are we detailing who was shot where and when at the climax? Each time the killer is described as shooting someone, a strobe light blinks and blood red lighting flashes on the stage, about the most literal minded and dull way of depicting such a tragedy as one could ask for, especially when it is repeated over and over, the way actual footage of a tragedy can be repeated on TV news until even the real thing loses all impact.

A kernel of a fascinating play is here. But real events have been tragically amped up in an attempt to add "drama" in a way that unintentionally leeches the story of moral complexity. But Soderbergh shows the desire as he always has on film to tackle work of complexity and ambition. And he certainly has good taste in actors: it's to be hoped Moretz will pursue the theater as successfully as she has film.

SOUTH PACIFIC ** 1/2 out of ****
PAPERMILL PLAYHOUSE

If you haven't seen South Pacific on stage before (or in a long time), Papermill Playhouse has a decent revival to offer. If however you saw the brilliant Broadway revival that ran from 2008 to 2010, this production (and any other production you ever saw, including the still-born feature film) will pale in comparison. If you've never read Tales From The South Pacific by James Michener, it's an excellent work and easily the best thing he ever wrote. Rodgers & Hammerstein took that collection of disparate short stories and stitched them together into a show that seamlessly captures romance during wartime, military life and not so incidentally racism. As usual, they also offered up a clutch of catchy songs.

It almost seems to have begun before we arrived at the theater: the nurse Nellie (Erin Mackey) and rich island planter Emile de Becque (Mike McGowan) have fallen in love so quickly they haven't even told each other yet. But it's wartime and Emile knows life is precious so he asks her to marry him and she excitedly agrees to think about it. At the same time, Lt. Joe Cable (Doug Carpenter) has volunteered for a dangerous mission to spy on the enemy and needs Emile's help. Before risking his life, he takes a little r&r with the daughter of Bloody Mary (Loretta Ables Sayre), a local entrepreneur who knows a handsome catch when she sees one.

Both these romances are poisoned by prejudice: Cable can't imagine bringing a "native" home with him to America and Nellie is horrified to discover that Emile is a widower and that his late wife was also colored. (She seems less surprised that he asked her to marry him without mentioning the fact that he has two children, a bizarre little plot failing that should have been corrected by now.) You can wash that man right out of your hair but you can't wash prejudice out of your heart.

This production is directed by Rob Ruggiero, choreographed by Ralph Perkins and with sets by Michael Yeargan and costumes by Catherine Zuber. Perhaps my mind is playing tricks on me but it feels deeply in debt to the Lincoln Center production, down to when pieces of the set are taken off stage by extras. The only area that doesn't feel like a facsimile is the lighting design by John Lasiter -- and not in a good way. The Broadway production was gorgeously lit with so many eye-catching variations on sunsets; this lighting seems to change at the drop of a hat, more of a mood ring than a subtle scene-setter.

This can be a problem with any classic. Once you've seen a definitive production, you begin to mentally

compare what you think you remember with what you're seeing. A guest of mine couldn't enjoy the new revival of *Les Miserables* because their fond memory of the original Broadway run was so deeply ingrained in them. I'd never seen a fresh, good production of that show, so I enjoyed the new one greatly. Even at its best, this production of *South Pacific* is probably just fine. But if you have no competing memories, that will surely be fine indeed, given the songs and the story.

Mackey leans a little too heavily on her accent; her Nellie seems more of a dumb hick who would be overwhelmed by Emile's world -- she's more of a pet than a partner. Worse, Mackey tries to sing in an accent rather than with her lovely natural voice. Even in the middle of songs, she'll switch awkwardly from accented lyrics to unaffected, distracting us every step of the way. She'd be wise to drop the twang while singing and playing it down while talking. McGowan is strictly in the Mario Lanza tradition of Emiles, though his accent becomes a little heavy especially when he's being impassioned. Again, less is more.

Tally Sessions is Luther, an enlisted man with a crush on Nellie. He's a lot better at unrequited love than the show's admittedly thin attempts at slapstick humor. And I think *Newsies* has sucked up all the chorus boys in town since the sailors here look to be about the oldest group of enlisted men in World War II. (Casting them at 21 and younger would also add to the pathos of impending battle and make Emile stand out as an older man more effectively.)

But Doug Carpenter intrigues the most. He's a square-jawed, old Hollywood handsome leading man to say the least. He's also got an excellent singing voice. One look at him and you know precisely the sort of roles he's played: Curly in *Oklahoma*, Tony in *West Side Story*, the Prince in *Cinderella*, Lancelot in *Camelot*. (What, no Marius in *Les Miz*?) A ripple of excitement burst through the audience as he launched confidently into "Younger Than Springtime" and he was equally effective on the scathing, angry "You've Got To Be Carefully Taught." As a singer, he's an excellent actor and performs these songs well. And to be fair, Cable is a rather one-dimensional secondary role. But I fear from this brief impression that Carpenter has coasted too long on his looks and let his profile do his acting for him. He somehow managed to be cheesy even in silhouette during scene changes. Carpenter has the charisma and the voice to be much much more than a soap-worthy pretty face. Here's hoping this was simply a role that slipped away from him or he applies himself more completely as an actor in the future.

That's a lot of caveats for a pleasant night with some great songs like "There Is Nothing Like A Dame" and "Some Enchanted Evening." But Papermill has raised its standards as a launching pad for Broadway worthy shows so we've come to expect more. And Sayre proves how great this show can be. Bloody Mary is not an avaricious woman trying to trap a wealthy white man into marriage. She sees a handsome man of good character and genuinely thinks her daughter and he would be happy. She offers him her money to make the pairing more palatable. Even when he rejects them, she recognizes her daughter's genuine love and will put the kibosh on a far more profitable marriage to a planter if only Cable will follow his heart. Six years later, Sayre's Tony nominated performance as Bloody Mary is just as fresh and convincing as ever.

THEATER OF 2014

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