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946: THE AMAZING STORY OF ADOLPHUS TIPS ** out of ****

THE PRICE * out of ****

COME FROM AWAY * out of ****

I'd seen so much wonderful theater recently, I was starting to feel a little dazed. A glorious *Idomeneo* at the Met, a revival of *The Glass Menagerie* (which I was among the few critics to appreciate, apparently) and a superlative *Sunday In The Park With George* whose only downside is that I can't go see it again before it closes in April. So after three great shows (all of which will be on my best of 2017 list), I saw three shows that fell short. The theater gods giveth and the theater gods taketh away....

946: THE AMAZING STORY OF ADOLPHUS TIPS ** out of ****

ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE

Author Michael Morpurgo is a beloved figure in the UK, producing a string of books that have entertained and slyly enlightened children for generations. He's written in many genres for many age levels and needless to say, some are better than others. Often you might find an O. Henry-like twist (as with the WW II-set tale *The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips* and the WW I-set *Private Peaceful*). And for those set in the past, you are certain to find an attention to detail and historical accuracy, a real sense of time and place. It's no slight on Morpurgo to say that the brilliant stage adaptation of *War Horse* was better than his book (and Spielberg's film) since it was such a magical piece. And his story inspired it.

Now we have the venerable Kneehigh company from the UK adapting another Morpurgo story. What *946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips* lacks — almost aggressively — is any sense of time and place. The story is set mostly in a small village during World War II and centers on the world of a little girl named Lily, whose dad is off fighting the Nazis but is more concerned with finding her lost cat Tips. It's a quiet, simple story with sadness, death, loss, prejudice and pain all bubbling underneath the surface, not to mention subtle but clear

lessons in the discrimination faced by black American soldiers. But artistic director Emma Rice has tossed in everything here, including a panto-style of performance entirely at odds with the bittersweet material, modern references, a band on stage throughout, puppetry, dancing, musical numbers, jokey audience interaction and a heavy-handed emphasis on racism.

Seeing it, one thinks back on Kneehigh's peak with *Brief Encounter*, an unlikely stage adaptation of the David Lean chamber piece of a film. That too tossed in everything at hand, from singers performing period numbers in the lobby, cinematic nods and much much more. For that show, all those bits seemed focused on recreating the era of the two would-be lovers who meet in a train station and have an affair of the heart if not the body. It seems Kneehigh got lucky there. Because now it's clear that every other show of theirs that I've seen has had a similar "everything-including-the-kitchen-sink" aspect that has not served the material well. I thought *A Matter Of Life And Death* (done at the National in London) was simply an unfortunate choice of material, an almost impossible attempt to turn the masterpiece of a film by Powell-Pressburger into a stage piece. That movie was resolutely a movie, I thought. But then there's *Tristan & Yseult* (which others liked more than me) and *The Wild Bride* and the pattern is clear, at least in my limited experience of their work. Whatever the story at hand, Kneehigh's Rice is tossing in whatever is at hand, whether it makes sense or not. Nowhere is that more of a problem than here, a show where most every choice is misguided.

First the story. We start in the "present," decades after WW II is over. A young man's grandfather has died and his eccentric, Aunt Mame-like grandmother takes him for a ride on a motorcycle, hands him a diary she kept as a child and disappears on a trip. Most of the show takes place in the past, during the height of WW II. His grandmother Lily is now a little girl forever looking for her cat Tips. Their small village is being overrun by American G.I.s and Lily befriends a young black American soldier named Adi. He and his quiet friend Harry are so pleasantly touched to be welcomed with respect and kindness by Lily's mom and grandfather that they practically adopt them, bringing hot dogs and treats for a Thanksgiving dinner, keeping an eye on Lily and looking for her cat too. The family has to abandon their farm so the soldiers can practice the D-Day landing everyone is waiting for but the soldiers remain a link to their home. A young boy Lily's age is an evacuee from London also pops into their life and soon makes himself at home on their farm. They get by, as they must, with the occasional song and dance to break the action, until military exercises gone awry and D-Day itself shake their world once and for all.

That's also the basic plot of the novel. But despite Morpurgo adapting the story with director Emma Rice, they drain away all the drama, nuance and texture of the book. One element however is gloriously right: the eye-catching set by Lez Brotherston (who also did the fine costumes) is a treat. Towards the edge of the set a series of metal buckets and pails are filled with water and castmembers come out in work clothes to "sweep up" and interact with the audience, ultimately tossing around some clothes so they can dunk them, wring them out and then place them on a clothesline. The colorful backdrop evokes a farm and the top of it creates a bandshell space for the musicians perched on a platform where they perform away throughout the night. It's simple, smart and flexible. You can't help smiling as you take your seat, but then it hits you, "Why is the band singing some '60s soul?" Shouldn't they be doing WW II numbers to set the scene? It seems a minor cavil but this is the first of many missteps.

In fact, their set list ranges across eras and feels quite random. The lead singer Akopre Uzoh looks natty indeed but his voice was merely serviceable. (Turns out he's the best of the bunch.) The story proper begins with the singer asking Lily if she knows who Bertolt Brecht is and Lily — unwilling to admit ignorance — says yes and then says he lives at such and such a place and her mom says when his wife goes out he puts on her clothes. Everything about this is wrong: it sets a naughty sort of adult tone when the story isn't concerned in the least with sex or sexual mores or children wise beyond their years. Brecht is a bizarre name to conjure, but so are Maya Angelou and others the singer evokes later on in the evening.

And so much of the drama is ignored. Lily's teacher is a French evacuee she locks horns with in the book, until the woman's husband is killed and Lily starts to see her as a person. In the show, the teacher is mostly an object of fun (her bloomers keep getting exposed) and they have no misunderstanding to surmount. The boy evacuated from London clearly is fond of Lily, indeed loves her as much as a boy can (which is to say, entirely). She knows this but states from the start she doesn't think of him that way and indeed expresses her love for the god-like but kind American soldier Adi. In the book, we expect Lily to eventually end up with the soldier (who is only 18 years old and thus once she's a little older perfectly appropriate). In the show, we have no sense of her becoming emotionally drawn to the soldier and indeed it seems like she and the boy are fated to be together. (That makes the end of the show feel like a stunt whereas in the book it's gently surprising in what happens and how.)

Racism is an undercurrent in the book. But in the show it's baldly pushed to the fore, from the unnecessary

and distracting renaming of the story on down. A tragedy during maneuvers is the terrible heart of the story, the moment when real life intrudes once and for all on Lily's relatively idyllic world. This story of a U-boat attack brings out the best in Rice, who opens the second act with a clever and forceful reenactment of the event, including those buckets and pails of water in spectacular fashion. But then, absurdly, the story is told all over again by Adi in a dramatic pouring out of his heart, a scene thoroughly emptied of any power since we just heard about it at length a few minutes earlier.

On and on it goes. They cut other bits of drama, like the grumpy relative the family must move in with. The entire tone of the show is like a panto (the British holiday shows that are broad, fun comedies, usually of fairy tales). Men dress up as women for comic effect, songs are sung (quite bland ones) and the cast playfully acknowledges the audience. (Quite nice here for the kids on the side seating.) The low point of this was surely an off-hand reference in the book by Lily turned into a mock battle between Churchill and Hitler. Here is the show at its most misguided — sure, we get to boo Hitler and cheer Churchill and goof around for a bit, but how does this help us enter into the world of a little girl having to face the heartache of war while missing her dad (and her cat!) and making a new friend? It doesn't.

The puppetry to bring to life dogs and sheep (and Tips!) is all simple and cleverly done, especially as a device to bridge the gap between the past and present. The cast is game enough, though Emma Darlow's French accent is only just good enough for panto. Similarly, the handsome Ncuti Gatwa has a very appealing nature but maintaining his American accent might have kept Gatwa's performance a tad on the surface. Mind you, surface is all we get here. I didn't like Katy Owen's choice of how to play Lily (always in a little kid's voice) but it was a clear choice and she was good in smaller parts.

Better was Adam Sopp as the London evacuee and Lily's grandson, straightforward and ready to play his part without the need to call attention to the lad's age. He deserved more applause but was up on the platform playing with the band at the end. It was all a mess, albeit not a painful or dull one. Still, as we left the theater the band dug into the 1972 easy listening hit "Summer Breeze" by Seals & Crofts, a WTF choice so random and out of place it merely underlined the random and poorly thought out nature of the entire production. I'd say Kneehigh has lost its way, but in fact it seems more like Kneehigh has been lost for a long time.

THE PRICE * out of ****

ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY AT AMERICAN AIRLINES THEATRE

I'd never seen Arthur Miller's *The Price* until now. Unfortunately, after seeing this unfocused and confusing production at the Roundabout, I feel like I *still* haven't seen Arthur Miller's *The Price* and now I'm not really sure I want to at all. It's never been a success on Broadway and while a better case can surely be made for it, I think I know why. It's a stilted work that spells out what should be implied and then does it again and again.

The story is simple. It's 1968 and Victor Franz (Mark Ruffalo) is a middle-aged cop. He's standing in the attic of his dad's old brownstone, a place stuffed to bursting with antique furniture and other items like a giant

harp, fencing foils and a Victrola. Dad died three years earlier but no one has dealt with what remains of the man's life, in part because Victor's far more successful brother Walter (Tony Shalhoub) won't ever return his phone calls. Now the brownstone is being torn down and he can't wait any longer. Victor is soon joined by his wife Esther (Jessica Hecht) and she urges him to drive a hard bargain with Gregory Solomon (Danny DeVito), the used furniture appraiser coming to look and perhaps make an offer.

Gregory shows up. Walter shows up. But most of all, the ghosts of the past show up, along with recriminations and regret. Victor is angry at his brother for leaving him to take care of their dad after the Great Depression broke the old man's heart (and turned them all from a family of wealth and privilege to paupers). His brother is angry at Victor for making him feel guilty over getting out of their miserable father's orbit. Victor's wife is angry at Victor for refusing to retire and go back to school or do something else or just for becoming a cop in the first place to take care of his dad. And poor Gregory Solomon is quietly angry because his lowball offer of \$1100 is pretty much accepted by Victor until everyone else butts in and queers the deal.

It's good to remember that critics can only judge the performance they saw and I suspect that while this production is not good that I caught perhaps an especially flat night. Mark Ruffalo might have been fighting a cold or he simply chose an especially flat and strangled sort of mumble for Victor. In either case, everyone seemed a little off with all four actors stumbling over their lines more than once and then backtracking to pick up the thread of what they were supposed to say. It happens. (Indeed, stumbling over a line can upset everyone's rhythm and definitely has a ripple effect.) What's more astonishing perhaps is how *little* it happens in live theater.

Nonetheless, I imagine it wasn't their best night, making this post-opening performance feel more like an early preview. It didn't help that the direction of Terry Kinney felt particularly flat and random. It's not often even poor choices in stage direction make me wonder why an actor is moving from one spot to another at that particular moment but it happened repeatedly here. (Like a moment where Shalhoub is telling a story while Hecht is perched on the couch next to him and — inexplicably — gets up and wanders over to a chair on the other side of the stage mid-story and sits down and turns to him while he finishes up.)

I truly had trouble understanding each of the characters. Forced revelations — “I called to offer you money so you could go to school!” “Dad could have given you the money himself!” “Harps don't grow on trees! You could have sold the harp!”) pile up, followed immediately by generic pronouncements about what it all means. Shalhoub's character seems to confess in the middle of the show that he had a nervous breakdown and was virtually incapacitated for three years (from their dad's death to now). He's a new man! And yet this barely registers with the others and he soon reverts to the oily, cynical character we've been led to believe he has always been.

Other examples abound. DeVito brings a little zing to the humor of the furniture buyer but a Jew he is not and the result is a Borscht-belt intrusion. His character is ham-handedly sent to an off-stage bedroom to lie down and when he occasionally wanders in to comment and then walk off again, it's awkward business Neil Simon would have made seem easy. And Ruffalo's voice is that of a regular guy working stiff. But that makes no sense since he was raised in the lap of luxury, including chauffeurs. (Indeed, his dad was in a tux and his mom dressed to the nines for some soiree when dad had to tell them their millions had been wiped out by the Crash.) More to the point, we're told repeatedly he's smart as a whip and had a gift for science the equal of his wildly successful brother. It would make more sense to hear that wasted intelligence in his voice and performance, rather than the inarticulate fellow who feels aggrieved but can't quite put it into words. None of the actors made much sense of their parts but I have to think the blame lies equally on the play and this staging.

And which comes first, a love of a production or the set that contributes to creating the right atmosphere so the play can work? Obviously, set designers know how crucial it is to embody the ideas of the play and the heart of the characters and the particular spirit of a revival. In this case, Derek McLane didn't. Furniture hangs down from the ceiling and damned if I know why, but it seemed a pointless and messy bother. As did the lighting of David Weiner, which portentously spotlighted various pieces of furniture as the show began. Like a life seemingly determined by a fateful decision (stay and take care of your helpless dad or abandon him and go to college?), so goes a revival of a flawed play. One bad choice can doom everything.

COME FROM AWAY * out of ****

GERALD SCHOENFELD THEATRE

On the night I attended, the most memorable moments of the musical *Come From Away* took place before the show began. Through sheer happenstance, it was a night dedicated to the 150th anniversary of Canada's

Confederation. I had no idea why the crowd for this Canadian musical felt so buzzy and was often decked out in red or sporting maple leaves.

Yes, the story takes place in Gander, Newfoundland, a small town swamped by international planes on 9-11 when pilots were ordered to land immediately. The all-but-forgotten town - once a stop-over for refueling before jumbo jets could cross the ocean in one go — had impressive airstrips and was suddenly inundated with traffic. The town's population practically doubled overnight and of course they were welcoming to the stranded and frightened passengers. Anyone would be but after all these were Canadians! When this quirky bit of trivia came to light, it became a rare happy story out of that dreadful time.

Still, the crowd seemed almost jubilant. Plus photographers swarmed the aisles. Oh and then Ivanka Trump showed up. I was mostly annoyed this meant a delay in the show starting. But an almost palpable antipathy from locals was evident. Finally I learned that both a former Canadian Prime Minister and the country's current leader Justin Trudeau would be coming. A woman behind me hissed that it was “disgusting” that Ivanka Trump was there because now Trudeau would have to sit with her. Later of course we learned she was there at his invitation, along with dozens and dozens of ambassadors from around the world. Her presence was a symbol of the musical's message: be welcoming and kind to others. Trudeau gave a friendly and relaxed (and short!) speech of platitudes about opening your hearts to strangers, the sort of thing that used to seem anodyne but now sadly feels provocative and political. No matter. The crowd studiously ignored Ivanka Trump (choosing not to boo her) and lustily cheered Trudeau. The drama was over and the show began.

My mother and three of my siblings are Canadian so a Canadian musical celebrating Canada's good nature and innate hospitality is something I'd love to acclaim. It seems almost churlish to take apart such a blandly friendly show like *Come From Away*. But bland it is, from the book to the songs to the choreography and pretty much every performance.

The inescapable problem is that there is no dramatic story to tell. For external reasons, an extraordinary number of international flights are forced to make an emergency landing in the middle of nowhere. They can't leave for days. It's an emergency and the locals open up their homes and their hearts. The passengers and crew are grateful. Everyone pitches in and makes do. Minor misunderstandings are swept aside, friendships are made and after a few days, they leave. That's it. The drama? The conflict? Nonexistent.

And all due respect to Canada, where I hope to take refuge someday soon, but this is a universal story. They might have landed in the middle of Kansas or Mexico or Ireland or New Zealand and I'm happy to imagine the entirely undramatic story would have been the same. People can be pretty decent in a pinch. (If anything, Canada is notable for being kind even when there *isn't* the sort of emergency that can bring out the best even in selfish bastards like us Americans.)

Any possibilities for tension are mostly ignored. It would be impossible to avoid some mention of suspicion with 9-11. So one Middle Eastern passenger who speaks in his own tongue when calling home is viewed with distrust for all of two seconds. The moment isn't resolved so much as swept aside, as if they were almost embarrassed to bring it up in the first place. (I do love Canada!) Mostly, we see an Egyptian passenger offer to help with the cooking repeatedly until confessing he's a world class chef and finally welcomed into the kitchen. When another passenger isn't eating, they find out he eats only Kosher and this rabbi is soon in charge of setting up a kosher kitchen. These are the sort of mini-conflicts that appear — thoroughly innocuous details like the need for nicotine patches for the passengers who were kept on the planes for almost a day but couldn't smoke. These bits make for good color in a magazine article but don't add up to much in a show.

Many of the characters are based on real people but they all feel anonymous. Some worry about loved ones who work in downtown NYC as firemen. Others simply want to get in touch with family members. Still others are two single people of certain age who fall in love. It's all harmless and hard to remember the moment after it happens.

The undistinguished set by Beowulf Boritt features a lot of chairs and a band hidden behind some tree trunks on either side of the stage, as if they were embarrassed to have a band. The musical staging by Kelly DeVine includes *Riverdance*-like clomping around. The direction by Christopher Ashley strives to create magic out of simple elements, like the chairs that are moved here to serve as airplane seats and there to create a local bar and so on. It's often wonderful how a little imagination can work wonders instead of an elaborate set. But here when two characters are standing on chairs substituting for the view on a hilltop or mountain, you never for a second think the actors are anywhere except standing on those wooden chairs.

It all comes down to the book, music and lyrics of Irene Sankoff and David Hein, none of which are

Broadway ready. The lack of drama in the story has already been spelled out. But the songs certainly don't flesh things out, trafficking in blunt rhymes and undistinguished melodies. The opener "Welcome To The Rock" is very typical, with its repeated "I'm an Islander/ I am an Islander" and lines like "Welcome to the fog/ Welcome to the trees/ To the ocean — and the sky/ And whatever's in between/ To the ones who've left/ You're never truly gone/ A candle's in the window/ And the kettle's always on." None of this is good, from the banal details like fog and trees to evoking the ocean and the sky "and whatever's in between." What's between the ocean and the sky? Nothing I think, except perhaps a boat or a bird? Clouds? And what does it mean to say "To the ones who've left, you're never truly gone"? That doesn't make sense before we've introduced the tragedy of 9-11 and even after it only works as a Hallmark sort of sentiment and only if you don't think about it too hard.

This isn't petty. In good shows, the lyrics do make sense. In great shows, they are moving and reveal character and much more. The songs of *Come From Away* do not, from the many indistinguishable bits to the would-be highlight "Me And The Sky," with Jenn Colella mannered while telling the story of a female pilot who broke down barriers in her career. Applause to the real-life figure, but here the song again has flat, unremarkable lyrics and Colella must sing in a register beyond her range, making the moment awkward rather than triumphant when she must reach for notes rather than soar.

It's all dreadfully disappointing when a politely banal speech by a politician proves more interesting than anything in the show it precedes. As the rare original musical coming from Canada, one wants to be kind. (My mom is not going to be happy with me about this; she even read the book the real story inspired.) And yes, it revolves around 9-11. But frankly, as with any work of art about any event like the Holocaust or AIDS or genocide, that makes me inclined to be harder on a work. Deal with emotionally charged topics like that and you better be good! But there's no need to raise the artistic bar here. For whatever mysterious reason, *Come From Away* is striking a chord with New York audiences; it's selling out at the moment and the weekly grosses are rising. They may be welcoming, but I can't be.

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 *

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Here's a nonpartisan site that will allow you to easily access your state's voter registration site.

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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.