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## Theater: Magical Theater "In And Of Itself," LuPone And Ebersole Defy Age In Unfocused "War Paint"

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IN AND OF ITSELF \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

WAR PAINT \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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DARYL ROTH THEATRE

The dream is the same: to build upon “tricks,” upon a *mere* magic show and create a work of theater, of art. (Of course, a magic show is art but just bear with.) Harry Houdini turned the escape act into a spectacle, a supernova of death-defying feats and the spotlight of publicity. Doug Henning took Broadway by storm with *The Magic Show*, a musical that used a perfunctory backstage plot as an excuse to showcase some Stephen Schwartz songs and Henning’s spectacular, Vegas-worthy illusions into a show far bigger than the sum of its parts. No one would ever revive *The Magic Show* because it’s not a good show as such. But it ran for four and a half years, making it the 35th longest running production in Broadway history. Maybe Ricky Jay cracked the code with his learned, erudite creations combining history with a showman’s flair and impressive skill.

But a work of art, a piece of theater that moves you rather than dares you to figure it out — that’s the goal of Derek DelGaudio who returns to NYC with his new piece *In And Of Itself*. He was last here in 2014 with *Nothing To Hide*, a duo act with Helder Guimaraes. That show included a killer opening segment in which the two artists created a story while demonstrating exceptional flair with card manipulation. It felt more like something Bill Irwin and David Shiner might create, a piece of theater in which two men continually one-upped each other via cards. Nothing else came close to that, but it pointed to the future for DelGaudio.

Here he is now with a new solo show, one that pushes further forward into creating moments of emotion and beauty where the “trick” or stunt or illusion is not the point. He’s not there yet, but the evening is satisfying on several levels and it’s quietly exciting to see where he’s headed.

Neil Patrick Harris produces (with others), Frank Oz directs and Mark Mothersbaugh composes the music so

it's a classy affair. The stage is simple, with six displays on the wall behind DelGaudio. Each one evokes a story, setting the tone for the evening (where story is more important than spectacle) and cannily letting you know how to pace yourself. (Six stories, six set pieces and then you're done.) One display includes a mechanical figure with a gun, another a set of scales, another a brick seeming to crash through a window and so on. The first story is a mythical one, telling the tale of a man bedeviled by problems who becomes famous for daring to play Russian roulette. A stranger tells the story of this foolhardy fellow to DelGaudio and then insists DelGaudio is that man. While he has room to grow as a personality and storyteller, DelGaudio holds our attention here and throughout well enough, even when no magic speeds the story along.



**Photo ©Matthew Murphy**

I'm loathe to describe each piece since half the fun is hearing the story and seeing the magic arise naturally out of the tale. But two capture the spirit here. One involves a sealed bottle. DelGaudio tells a story and ends on a darkened stage, sitting in a chair, facing the audience and folding up a card of some sort. He origamis it into the shape of a tiny sailboat. Then DelGaudio stands up and uses the back of the canvas chair and a spotlight to do a little shadow puppetry with the boat sailing on a "sea." It's a lovely effect, augmented nicely by Mothersbaugh's music. Then he sticks the "boat" to the chair back and picks up the sealed bottle. Now he uses shadows to make it appear as if the boat is inside the bottle; that too is a lovely effect. But then the boat actually *is* in the bottle, though we haven't a clue how and more importantly don't care. Many magic acts attempt a sense of wonder or beauty, but this is one step closer to a complex merging of story and the

illusionist's art.

Even better is a story DelGaudio offers from his childhood, one in which his six year old self discovers his divorced mom now has a girlfriend. He quickly accepts this (with a moving caveat that elevates the story tremendously) and later mentions it to another little boy. Suddenly, they can't be friends anymore, people whisper and then shout and the brick we've seen all along becomes the brick tossed through the window of their home as a warning. In the highlight of the show, DelGaudio beautifully offers to take away the brick's power as a symbol of hate — he makes it “disappear” by building a house of cards around it and simply hiding the brick from view. He then actually makes the brick disappear but it almost doesn't matter. The story is powerful and personal — even just by constructing the house of cards he's created a powerful moment. More of this follows and I've no doubt that on the night I attended a gold brick shorn of its nasty power could be found at the corner of Broadway and Fifth Avenue. (Though among the first out of the theater, I didn't rush to check. It wasn't necessary because I accepted it on faith.) It's an elegant illusion but the story surrounding it, the house of cards and everything building to the end made this a highlight, the sort of set piece that DelGaudio is striving for.

Indeed, a feat of impressive memorization at the end of the night wasn't just that. It involved DelGaudio looking audience members in the eye and identifying them in a personal way and that was far more interesting and emotional than a mere display of skill. Another highlight involved an audience member sitting on stage and reading a letter penned to them by a close and important person in their life. You could puzzle over how it got there and how they ended up choosing that one particular letter out of a stack. But it's the emotion of the moment that was more intriguing. For a civilian to come on stage and sit down and be quietly observed by a hundred strangers is a powerful rare thing. You could be reading the phone book and it would still be a rare and powerful occurrence for most anyone. But to be reading a heartfelt note (in this case from the person's mother) makes it truly special. Often the person tears up while doing so.

Despite my appreciation for what he's doing, my rating of three stars is slightly generous, more encouraging because of what DelGaudio might do next. Several elements hold this show back. Its entire purpose seems admirably humanizing, focused on the emotional and personal. However, DelGaudio's framing story of being the reincarnation of a daring player of Russian roulette feels out of whack with that. He mock points a barrel of a gun (his finger) at his forehead and compares risking his life in that game to coming on stage and baring his soul. For a night that seemed intended *not* to create an omnipotent “DelGaudio The Great” persona a la so many magicians of the past, this felt wrong. So did two telling moments. In one, a planned bit in which he sets up a further display of card manipulation, DelGaudio acts perturbed by two women who didn't applaud after an impressive moment. This is only so he can then trump that moment but he actually sounded annoyed and pointed out he was wearing a f\*\*\*ing blindfold while doing it. (The cursing felt aggressive here.) Again, this mock anger conflicts with the quiet confessional tone of the show. Similarly, when the woman reading the letter this particular night didn't break down, he again slipped by seeming genuinely annoyed that she was holding it together and not reacting more emotionally to the moment he'd created.

In general, his storytelling and demeanor are stronger when he's not trying to command or impress.

DelGaudio can hold our attention, but it's not a masterful performance yet. He's a natural at magic but not as yet a natural at stage patter. If he takes a cue from his most memorable moments, DelGaudio won't improve by becoming more magisterial but more human, working with the audience to create special moments rather than working to wow them and being frustrated when they don't respond.

My mother skated in ice shows and once commented how the audience sometimes didn't appreciate the really subtle and challenging moments on display but would always burst into applause when the skater twirled in place faster and faster, even though that wasn't a terribly difficult stunt to execute. You can become frustrated at that or you can simply learn to accept, to know the experts will appreciate the subtleties and how they create a mood of elegance and art even if the audience isn't quite aware of it. Sometimes the best magic isn't applauded at all.

WAR PAINT \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

## NEDERLANDER THEATRE

A musical about Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubenstein — two titans of the beauty industry — battling it out for supremacy in the hearts and pocketbooks of American women? Starring two titans of musical theater, Patti LuPone and Christine Ebersole? One can easily imagine a diva-fest, a campy and humorous roll in the mud filled with big songs and bigger egos. But this show is by the team behind Ebersole's Tony-winning *Grey Gardens* (Doug Wright did the book, Scott Frankel the score and melodies, Michael Korie the lyrics). So TV's *Feud* it's not. Unfortunately, it's also curiously un-involving even as a more refined, sophisticated attempt at a dual biography. It's more Arden than Rubenstein in style, but neither woman comes out a winner.

They certainly are a study in contrast. Elizabeth Arden (Ebersole) is the high society fixture, a self-made woman who has befriended the blue-bloods and celebrities that turned her pink-packaged and beautifully ribboned makeup into a mainstay of an elegant woman's arsenal for generations. Arden is blonde, poised and just as likely to be in the press for having her thoroughbred win the Kentucky Derby or being seen at the right event as for her business empire.

In contrast, Rubenstein is five foot nothing with an Eastern European accent so thick it's a running gag. She's Jewish and smart and while she's determined to make her mark she's also far more aware than Arden of the barriers facing her. Arden sells sophistication, right down to the shades of pink that become her trademark. Rubenstein sells science, right down to the austere black and white labels that speak of a formula for success in fighting the aging process. (No one can stop time, says Rubenstein, but maybe she can slow it down a little.)

These two striking women are sung by two artists in peak form, with their voices perfectly suited to each character and sounding glorious. Even if they sang wordless melodies or nonsense lyrics, the talent and voices of Ebersole and LuPone would let us know immediately who they are and where they're coming from.

As if that contrast isn't enough, we've got the two men in their lives. Arden steals away Rubenstein's gay right hand man (Douglas Sills) on the business side, a genius at marketing. That sends Arden's husband (John Dossett) — her essential business partner — into the enemy camp of Rubenstein. Toss in Congressional hearings, World War II and the simple fact of two established businesses proving incapable of changing with the times and you've got yourself the makings of a heck of a show.

So why does *War Paint* remain so bloodless? No doubt, they left a lot of fun out of it by going highbrow. Not that this is a mistake as such. History really didn't cooperate for anyone preferring a catfight. These women never really met so you've got a show with two rivals who are never in the ring together, battling it out only from a distance. They don't talk until the final, mild scene in which — surprise — these powerful figures discover they have a lot in common, including mutual respect. So beyond some amusing digs at the other, they don't go mano a mano anywhere except on store shelves. At most, they're seen again and again in adjoining booths at a restaurant, tilting their heads to listen in on the other's dilemma of the moment. Eavesdropping is not a source of great drama. Two lives proceeding on parallel tracks — both achieving tremendous success and remarkable achievement? Well, there's not a lot of room for heartbreak or tragedy in that either. Yes, they sacrifice much in their personal lives and a man surely wouldn't have had to. But it never cuts deep. It's not like their rival managed to have it all, whatever "all" is.

Every conflict feels isolated and alone, just like these two women in their corporate offices. The two men in their lives might have been the emotional fulcrum of the show. But once they switch sides, it seems to matter very little except for the occasional aside or muttered regret. Congressional hearings that force them to list

their ingredients? A momentary scandal eclipsed by WW II. Their canny switch to a war footing? Maybe patriotic fervor or simply smart marketing but it doesn't really matter. Both companies blindsided by the youth market, tv advertising and the "low class" upstart Revlon? Well, they'd been on top for decades so it's hardly crushing to be put out to pasture — even by your own company — after being so good for so long.

Essentially, we're seeing the same story told twice. Arden is kept at a distance by those blue-bloods because she earned her money rather than inheriting it. Rubenstein gets the cold shoulder because she's a Jew. But rejection is rejection and a feeling of repetitiveness kicks in. We watch Arden reject out of hand the tacky idea of sponsoring a TV quiz show, despite the pleas of her right hand man. Then we watch Rubenstein do the same thing: TV ad pitch, plea from her for-once-right right hand man and dismissive no. Indeed, the entire second act feels very passive for the story of two such formidable women. They are buffeted by war, blindsided by the rise of the teen market, shoved aside by a board or passing times and do little but suffer these indignities with flair.

The tired sameness of their stories extends to the set, which must do double duty for both women and ends up being blandly the same, with rows of bottles and jars along the back wall simply being lit with different colored lights (pink for Arden, of course) depending on who is front and center. No such blandness exists when it comes to their costumes. The work of Catherine Zuber has every opportunity to shine and she takes it, allowing each women to display style and flair and in the case of Rubenstein a *lot* of jewelry. Special kudos to Lyle Jones (the dresser for LuPone) and Laura Horner (the dresser for Ebersole) who are doing exhausting, extraordinary work behind the scenes and probably need a stiff drink and thorough massage after each performance.

So there's no *war* in *War Paint*, no battle to defeat the enemy once and for all. Each strives to beat the other of course, but it's clear they each flourished with their particular marketing angle. They don't go toe to toe in real life and there's room for both. This is not a zero sum war, but clearly a case where the competition made each one better.

The same is true onstage for our stars. Since they don't go toe to toe, you don't sense any need for the one to show up the other. Just as with Arden and Rubenstein, LuPone and Ebersole surely recognized the better each of them was, the better the show. Arden's eleven o'clock number "Pink" allows Ebersole to soar, even if as with the rest of the songs they've got it remains intellectually interesting but never really gripping as musical theater. Rubenstein's "Forever Beautiful" does much the same for LuPone, with a slight edge since she gets to play off the famous portraits of herself commissioned from some of the great artists of the 20th century. At the curtain call, they take their bows and then embrace each other as friends, as if to assure us they really aren't rivals. In a show that never draws blood, we never doubted it for a moment.

## **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 \*\*

*In And Of Itself* \*\*\*

*War Paint* \*\*

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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.***