



THE BLOG

# Theater: 'Marjorie' Not So Prime; Bowie's Noble Folly; Glad 'Plaid Tidings'

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**MARJORIE PRIME** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**LAZARUS** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**PLAID TIDINGS** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**MARJORIE PRIME** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS**

A finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, Jordan Harrison's latest play has a high concept but hopes to dig deeper. In the near future (2050? 2060?) people find therapeutic comfort in a "prime," a robot built to look like a lost love, such as a spouse or parent or child. (Undoubtedly there are pet primes as well.)

Talk to them long enough -- that is, feed them enough information about the person they are meant to be -- and the prime becomes more and more realistic, more convincing and thus more creepy or more of a source of solace, depending on your point of view. If you're wealthy enough, it's a luxury that might soon seem a necessity.

That's certainly the case for the elderly Marjorie (Lois Smith). She's slowly fading away, watched over by a harried daughter (Lisa Emery), a doting son-in-law (the excellent Stephen Root) and a prime for her late husband (a nicely modulated Noah Bean) that repeats back beloved stories and avoids touchy subjects like the son they lost to suicide as a teenager.

Anyone with a passing familiarity with sci-fi will not be surprised by what happens. The prime of her husband becomes more assured in his "performance." The more suspicious the daughter becomes, the less

surprised we are when she turns to a prime for comfort herself. Similarly, it's no surprise when the primes begin to talk amongst themselves when humans aren't around.

*Marjorie Prime* has a lot of ideas on its mind, but "what makes us human" as opposed to a machine is not perhaps one of them. So the image of primes talking to one another doesn't create a creepy vibe or make us question humanity. Harrison seems more interested in the stories we tell one another, the shared fabric of a life and how stories told again and again morph out of necessity, be it the necessity of remembering a second-hand story or the necessity of hiding from the truth.

Despite all the rich possibilities raised by the premise, *Marjorie Prime* remained unfocused and rather vague, much like the vague and unsatisfying set of *Laura Jellinek*, which seemed to me like a Florida home, but with perhaps a bit more space in the living room than your usual condo. Why certain furniture was moved around or taken away entirely remained a mystery to me.

The cast seemed lost in all that expanse. Smith of course is a pro and everyone given the chance would, like her, modulate their performance when veering from human to awkward early prime to more assured later prime brimming with knowledge. But it amounted to so little, I couldn't take more than technical pleasure in their work. Smith was an elderly woman wrestling with her sieve-like memory and then she wasn't. Bean was a bland replica of her husband and then subtly became more assured. Before any real emotion intruded -- like the pleasure of watching a prime come to life or a person feeling betrayed by their own attachment to what is in essence a talking toaster -- the scenes would end and some new one begin.

Worse, there's an inexplicable twist. The daughter seems a perfectly typical woman, overwhelmed a bit by her mother's decline and resentful that she never had the same love as the son that killed himself. But when her mother dies too, the daughter's reaction is utterly unexpected and not in a good way. It's just unconvincing that she would be so fragile and distraught. If this was intended to be a play about a family bedeviled by mental illness or trauma, the groundwork was most certainly not laid in the early scenes.

Luckily, we have Root. He's the rock of this extended family and brings a natural believability to every scene he's in. I still fondly remember his work on the sitcom *NewsRadio* but here Root shows again what a talent he possesses. Of course, he can only do so much in what is essentially a secondary role. And director Anne Kaufman can't bring a fuzzy play into focus. Tellingly, what I remember most vividly are brief images created

when one scene dissolves into the next: Bean's prime enigmatically framed in a doorway, two people facing each other in silent tension and so on. Each is captured with an economy of detail, abetted by lighting (Ben Stanton), sound design (Daniel Kluger) and costumes (Jessica Pabst) to create an air of expectant mystery. It soon passes, but for a few brief moments you're convinced something interesting is about to begin.

You can watch the playwright discuss this work in depth on an hour-long video done in conjunction with the Guggenheim.

**LAZARUS** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

### **NEW YORK THEATRE WORKSHOP**

The David Bowie musical packed with talent both onstage and off doesn't work in the least. But by god it falls flat on its face trying. It's not an effective piece of art, but art it most assuredly is. Surely it's more respectable than letting some producer plumb Bowie's catalog to create a jukebox musical about a sexually questioning young man who comes to Swinging London and finds himself in rock and roll.

It was probably doomed from the start because Lazarus is a sequel of sorts to the novel *The Man Who Fell To Earth* by Walter Tevis. The film of that novel was by Nicolas Roeg and it was an inexplicable oddity even in the 1970s, when everyone was taking acid. Truly the only reason to see it was for the inspired casting of Bowie as an alien, a part he was born to play.

Bowie would prove to be an excellent actor, garnering acclaim both on film and on stage in various parts. One thing no one was looking for was a return to the source of his film debut. Did people have questions after walking out of *The Man Who Fell To Earth*? Of course they did, since the film mostly raised questions, much like the far superior *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

*Lazarus* doesn't attempt to answer those questions of course. It simply continues the story in high art fashion. I barely watched the original film once as a kid when it aired 7,000 times on HBO. But you don't need to know much to follow the tale. Bowie's character Newton -- embodied here by Michael C. Hall -- is an alien stranded on earth. He came looking for water to rescue his dying planet. He fell in love, lost her, made billions but was frustrated in all attempts to leave by shadowy villains who kept his alien nature as secret as possible.

Now a reclusive, Howard Hughes-like figure, our hero Newton is trapped in his apartment, nominally cared for by an assistant Elly (Cristin Milioti) who frankly needs assistance herself. Newton is also haunted by visions of his dead love and the violence of people around him. You'll also find him haunted by an angel-like ghost of a girl (Sophia Anne Caruso) whose task is to help Newton so she can "pass over." Oh and there's Elly's suspicious husband (Bobby Moreno) and a charming serial killer named Valentine (Michael Esper) on the loose. None of it makes a lick of sense and none of that should matter.

Come for story and character and you'll be disappointed. Come for Art, for the experience and the visuals and the songs (both Bowie classics, recent album tracks and a new number or two) and you'll still be disappointed, but not so much as you might if you considered that Enda Walsh co-wrote the book and Van Hove's marvelous technical team is on board.

The staging is striking, with a rock band behind a plastic, see-through divider and a large video monitor/TV displaying footage smack dab in the center. Sometimes this TV will display the visions in Newton's head, other times it displays footage of the scene we're watching but with things

slightly out of sync -- maybe you're seeing action that never takes place on stage, maybe you're seeing action from a different perspective and so on.

Every once in a while the cast bursts into a Bowie song. It's a credit to Michael C. Hall that all of this holds our attention in the least. He's so committed to the evening that you desperately want it to add up. Sometimes when he's singing a Bowie song in a Bowie-like quaver (which should be off-putting but isn't), you're almost ready to believe. But the songs feel randomly inserted (I've no idea why the ghost/angel child is the one belting out "Life On Mars" for example) and never truly seem to track the action. Milioti has a thankless part as a disintegrating woman aping Newton's lost love. Moreno's is even more slender. But Esper brings a sneaky, sexy charm to Valentine, though why this particular serial killer should be crossing the path of Newton or why we care about his trail of blood escapes me.

Somehow the fact that it's not going to work *at all* frees you up early on to simply appreciate the craft of all involved, not least Hall. The show may end on a visual flourish you can see a mile off, but that actor makes you care just a little anyway. Sometimes escape is only possible by breaking inside. And sometimes art is only possible by falling flat on your face. The next efforts of all involved will surely benefit by stretching themselves on this folly. If nothing else, we've got Bowie's new album due out in January.

Here's the title track.

**PLAID TIDINGS** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**YORK THEATRE COMPANY**

To be honest, I wasn't eager to check out *Plaid Tidings*. The original

*Forever Plaid* was about four young guys with dreams of making doo-wop history who died in a car accident on their way to a gig. That show was all about them getting to return to earth and give the concert they missed out on, a performance naturally packed to the gills with standards from the 1950s and early 1960s. It ran and ran and resulted in endless touring companies and local productions, even a movie! But what are they, zombies? Stay dead already!

Now comes this sequel/holiday edition. The Plaids must return to earth because they need to renew their heavenly bona fides by doing songs of one sort or another. It takes a few run-throughs of classic pop tunes (and an assist from the angelic Rosemary Clooney) to nudge the Plaids towards their new mission: performing the holiday TV special they'd always imagined for themselves after hopefully reaching the big time.

A sequel to such a franchise hit might have been irresistible to producers but creator Stuart Ross held firm for more than a decade before finally caving to the inevitable. The fact that *Plaid Tidings* toured the country for more than a decade before heading to New York City certainly didn't bode well. But against all expectations, it's a sweet, silly enjoyable evening of popular songs, enlivened by some good jokes (and some bad jokes) and blessed with a cast that elevates the modest material nicely. *Plaid Tidings* proves to be glad tidings for anyone wanting comfort food in their theater outing this holiday season.

To be honest, I only dimly remember the plot of *Forever Plaid*. But I think this holiday-themed sequel has more quiet moments, that it reaches for some genuine emotions slightly more often than the light-hearted original. It's certainly blessed with a strong cast of four actors who navigate tricky sections like medleys that carom from one carol to another and an Ed Sullivan tribute that's manic in its intensity.

They make it seem easy, never overselling the jokes or the broken hearts beating under those plaid jackets. Bradley Beahen is Frankie, the ringleader of sorts; Jose Luaces is the youthful heartthrob Sparky; John-Michael Zuerlein is the sad-sack Smudge who took refuge in his basement when the parents would bicker; and the endearing Ciarán McCarthy possesses the best voice of the quartet (though they're all thankfully solid in that department).

By and large, it remains on target, from Frankie's amusing rant about the cruel bullying in "Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer" to their low-tech tribute to Perry Como's Christmas specials on TV. While satisfying in and of itself, the elaborate Ed Sullivan tribute is the only misstep. It simply has no relationship to the holidays (unlike the rest of the show) and since we've just paid homage to TV specials like Como's it feels shoe-horned in. The show would be better and sweeter without it.

Otherwise, it's self-effacing fun, never great but happy to reach for pretty good and succeed admirably. The four credited with vocal and musical arrangements -- James Raitt, Brad Ellis, Raymond Berg and David Snyder (who also did musical continuity) -- also deserve special recognition for their deft weaving in and out of numerous standards and holiday tunes. Ross oversees it all with practiced aplomb. After 25 years, he knows the Plaid world upside down and will presumably remain in it for another 25 years if he chooses.

## **THEATER OF 2015**

[\*Honeymoon In Vegas\*](#) \*\*

[\*The Woodsman\*](#) \*\*\*

[\*Constellations\*](#) \*\* 1/2

[\*Taylor Mac's A 24 Decade History Of Popular Music 1930s-1950s\*](#) \*\* 1/2

[\*Let The Right One In\*](#) \*\*

[\*Da\*](#) no rating

[\*A Month In The Country\*](#) \*\* 1/2

[\*Parade\*](#) in Concert at Lincoln Center \*\* 1/2

[\*Hamilton\*](#) at the Public \*\*\*

[\*The World Of Extreme Happiness\*](#) \*\* 1/2

[\*Broadway By The Year 1915-1940\*](#) \*\*

[\*Verite\*](#) \* 1/2

[\*Fabulous!\*](#) \*

[\*The Mystery Of Love & Sex\*](#) \*\*

[\*An Octoroon\*](#) at Polonsky Shakespeare Center \*\*\* 1/2

[\*Fish In The Dark\*](#) \*

[\*The Audience\*](#) \*\*\*

[\*Josephine And I\*](#) \*\*\*

Posterity \* 1/2  
The Hunchback Of Notre Dame \*\*  
Lonesome Traveler \*\*  
On The Twentieth Century \*\*\*  
Radio City Music Hall's New York Spring Spectacular \*\* 1/2  
The Heidi Chronicles \*  
The Tallest Tree In The Forest \* 1/2  
Broadway By The Year: 1941-1965 \*\*\*  
Twelfth Night by Bedlam \*\*\*  
What You Will by Bedlam \*\*\* 1/2  
Wolf Hall Parts I and II \*\* 1/2  
Skylight \*\*\*  
Nellie McKay at 54 Below \*\*\*  
Ludic Proxy \*\* 1/2  
It Shoulda Been You \*\*  
Finding Neverland \*\* 1/2  
Hamlet w Peter Sarsgaard at CSC no stars  
The King And I \*\*\*  
Marilyn Maye -- Her Way: A Tribute To Frank Sinatra at 54 Below \*\*\*  
Gigi \* 1/2  
An American In Paris \*\* 1/2  
Doctor Zhivago no stars  
Fun Home \*\*  
Living On Love \* 1/2  
Early Shaker Spirituals: A Record Album Interpretation \*\*\*  
Airline Highway \* 1/2  
The Two Gentlemen Of Verona (Fiasco Theatre) \*\*\*  
The Visit (w Chita Rivera) \*\* 1/2  
The Sound And The Fury (ERS) \*\*  
Broadway By The Year: 1966-1990 \*\*\*  
The Spoils \* 1/2  
Ever After (at Papermill) \*\*  
Heisenberg \*\*\* 1/2  
An Act Of God \*\*  
The National High School Musical Theatre Awards \*\*\*  
Amazing Grace \*  
The Absolute Brightness Of Leonard Pelkey \*\* 1/2  
Cymbeline (Shakespeare in the Park w Rabe and Linklater) \*\*\*  
Hamilton \*\*\* 1/2  
The Christians \*\*\*  
A Midsummer Night's Dream (Pearl Theatre Company) \*\* 1/2  
Spring Awakening (w Deaf Theatre West) \*\*\* 1/2  
Daddy Long Legs \*\*  
Reread Another \*\*



[Fool For Love](#) (w Nina Arianda and Sam Rockwell) \*\* 1/2  
[Barbecue](#) (at Public) \*\*  
[Old Times](#) (w Clive Owen) \*\*  
[The Bandstand](#) \*\*\*  
[The Gin Game](#) \*\*  
[Rothschild & Sons](#) \*\* 1/2  
[The Inn At Lake Devine](#) \*\*  
[First Daughter Suite](#) \*\* 1/2  
[The Humans](#) \*\*\* 1/2  
[Sylvia](#) \*\*  
[Dames At Sea](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Ripcord](#) \*\*  
[Hir](#) \*\*  
[Thér se Raquin](#) \*  
[King Charles III](#) \*\*\* 1/2  
[Henry IV](#) (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) \*\*\*  
[On Your Feet](#) \*\*  
[Misery](#) \* out of \*\*\*\*  
[A View From The Bridge](#) \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
[Allegiance](#) \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
[China Doll](#) \*  
[School Of Rock](#) \* 1/2  
[New York Animals](#) \*\* 1/2  
[The New Standards Holiday Show](#) \*\*\*  
[Marjorie Prime](#) \*\*  
[Lazarus](#) \* 1/2  
[Plaid Tidings](#) \*\* 1/2

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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.

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