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Theater: Mary Testa Is The "Queen Of The Mist"

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QUEEN OF THE MIST ** 1/2 out of ****
TRANSPORT GROUP/THE GYM AT JUDSON

The new theater space The Gym at Judson launched *Lysistrata Jones* straight from this intimate "workout space for the arts" to Broadway. It will be no surprise when *Queen Of The Mist* finds further life as well.

It's a compelling, promising new musical by the talented composer Michael John LaChiusa that tells the intriguing and true story of Annie Edson Taylor, the first person to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel (and live). (The marvelous picture book author Chris Van Allsburg just delivered a new work, *Queen Of The Falls*, about

this very same woman in April.)

But above all it's a marvelous showcase for actress Mary Testa, who creates a vivid portrait of Annie the moment she walks onstage and never wavers for a moment in her commitment and appeal, even when the show gets a little shaky.

it begins charmingly with Annie glimpsed in a series of financially precarious situations at the turn of the century. A formidable woman with a con artist's gift for patter, Annie is being pressed for rent by her landlord and grandly insists that he will be paid as soon as she is paid by her dance students. "But you have no students!" Yes, and isn't that a shame that deportment means so little to the younger generation Annie smoothly continues, overwhelming her creditors with the force of her will until she can escape in the middle of the night.

Dance, feminine hygiene, you name it -- Annie tries to peddle it all from town to town. She may have a sister Jane (Theresa McCarthy) happily living in a small town. But Annie is essentially alone and driven to do...something. "There Is Greatness In Me" Testa sings as Annie flounders for something to harness her will. The song is rather blunt lyrically, but when Testa sings it, you believe it. We're not surprised when a flashback reveals Annie to be unafraid when seeing a caged tiger at the circus leap at her; she's a fearless woman. And somehow she lights upon the cockamamie idea of going over Niagara Falls in a barrel (and surviving; surviving is important) as a way of making her fame and fortune and keeping that tiger at bay.

LaChiusa savors the art song stylings of numbers that peer into Annie's soul, but the show comes to life on simpler tunes, like the duet between Annie and the two-bit yet honest manager she joins forces with, Frank Russell (a fine Andrew Samonsky). Throughout, the spritelier numbers like "Types Like You" or the exo celebration "Do The Pan!" benefit from a fine six piece orchestra that maintains the flavor of the era thanks to LaChiusa's gift and appropriate orchestrations by Michael Starobin. Those orchestrations do as much as the vivid costumes by Kathryn Rohe to place us in Annie's time and place.

Even before she takes the plunge, Annie takes to the road, hawking her upcoming daredevil feet at fairs and exhibitions. That results in one of the most unexpected moments, a scene where Annie talks with a lone man (Tally Sessions) who is looking for the President of the United States and merely wants directions but is also wavering in what is obviously a plot to assassinate the head of the country. Heedless, Annie bucks him up with her usual forthright determination that's both funny and frightening and revealing of how she might be the sort to actually go over Niagara Fall in a barrel.

Soon enough Annie herself is taking the plunge. She oversees the building of the barrel (even though absolutely nothing is being constructed, Testa's focus is such you can practically see the barrel anyway, along with "Queen Of The Mist" printed on its side). And then she takes her life into her hand in a finale that lets LaChiusa soar. It's a strong, funny and memorable first act, anchored every step of the way by Testa.

Act two, as so often happens, is less successful. As in real life, Annie survives the plunge and makes national headlines, only to see a fickle country quickly move on to the next sensation. Going over the falls has changed Annie somehow. She's a flop as a lecturer and refuses to answer the one question everyone wants to ask: what was it like; how did you feel? She turns on her manager (and friend) and gets another, only to see the first tour the seedier vaudeville circuits with another gal pretending to be Annie (and not doing any better). Emotionally, Annie is shut down for most of the second act, except for a showdown with Carrie Nation, who claims to be only focused on a higher calling but Annie soon puts the woman in her place as loving "The Green," as in money. (It is a good scene in its dialogue but the song is perhaps the weakest in the show.) Annie breaks from her sister and sinks into oblivion, fame and fortune or something more important seemingly out of her grasp.

This creates numerous problems. First, the idea that this woman who is so smart and glib and commanding would be a flop on the lecture circuit is hard to believe. Testa is simply too compelling. Besides, even if we show audiences becoming fickle and bored, there's no reason why Annie's desperation

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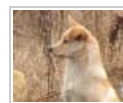
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to entertain them shouldn't be tremendous fun. We're too drawn to her endless capacity to talk to see anything less. Further, her time on the circuit is an opportunity for some more upbeat numbers that LaChiusa doesn't take advantage of yet. Instead we get an unfunny glimpse of a woman who curses up a storm while posing as Annie. (Annie's own brief bit of vulgarity also feels out of character for a woman who has never said so much as "damn," I believe.)

Finally, the key emotional moment of the show is avoided. When Annie emerges from the barrel, she looks fruitlessly for her manager and friend Frank. He was scared she might die and was drinking himself into oblivion at a bar instead of being there for her. We see -- very briefly -- the crowd surging towards Annie and her looking for him, but that's it. Surely the climax of excitement and questions and applause is worthy of song, especially since it can be bittersweetened by the fact that Frank isn't there.

Annie may have shut down in public, but there's no reason why she should shut down for us. Too many opportunities are there to brighten up a quiet, somber show, which ends in a moving, memorable manner as Annie finally reveals the secret of her experience. Frank might be cast a little older to give us the frisson of romance between two friends and the estrangement of her sister should make more sense. This is a serious, fascinating work in progress and with Testa at its heart, it's worth catching right now and developing more down the road.

Jack Cummings III makes good use of the tiny space and the entire cast is good in multiple roles (with Stanley Bahorek an especially good standout in the solid ensemble). But they are all in the shadow of Mary Testa and her talent. Thank goodness LaChiusa is creating a role worthy of her.

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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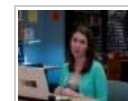
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