

# Mighty Real Mighty Fun; Amiable Youth

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**MIGHTY REAL** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**THIS IS OUR YOUTH** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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### THEATRE AT ST. CLEMENT'S

Why haven't they made a musical about Sylvester? Teasingly and boldly nicknamed the Queen Of Disco, Sylvester had a clutch of hits and worked high heels with such fierceness that even Hedwig would have to step back and admire him. He also had a tragic, all too brief life that included ostracism for being gay and modest success soon snuffed out by AIDS. But a musical? For me, Sylvester was always more interesting as a gay icon, a trailblazer, rather than as an artist. Hey, he has two or three great singles to his credit -- "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)," "Dance (Disco Heat)" and "Do You Wanna Funk!" That's better than most acts can ever dream about. But it's not much to build a musical around.

Well, Mighty Real flips over everything I expected, mostly in good ways. Written starring, co-directed and co-produced by Anthony Wayne, it makes terrific use of the few great singles and memorable covers of Sylvester, along with a handful of wisely chosen "surprises" to flesh the discography out. Actually, it's the book that isn't terribly interesting, with Sylvester's life following the usual bio-musical route: modest anecdote followed by song followed by quick joke followed by song followed by tear-jerking revelation followed by song.

Happily, Mighty Real gets it mostly mighty right. The chatter is kept to a minimum (and could even be trimmed a little more, though god knows it's pretty minimal as it is). The onstage band led by Alonzo Harris (with James Cage tearing it up on trumpet) is excellent. The four backup singers are tight and also help fill the theater. Though "backup singer" doesn't quite do justice to Jacqueline B. Arnold as Martha Wash and choreographer Anastacia McCleskey as Izora Armstead. They tear it up performing songs by divas that influenced Sylvester (a canny way to broaden the show's musical offerings).

In fact, they're so good that Wayne gets the night's biggest laugh by looking peeved over their spotlight-stealing vocals. (In a rare bit of complexity, he's also genuinely hurt later in the show when they go off on their own to become The Weather Girls and enjoy the one-hit wonder that was "It's Raining Men," another non-Sylvester song performed in full, thank goodness.)

Truly, it's no diss to say the show is being staged in the modest Theatre At St. Clement's with about \$5 for the set (there's a disco ball and a giant "SYLVESTER" logo and that's it) and modest costumes (created by co-director and co-producer Kendrell Bowman). And yet it feels like a blast.

The performance lasts about 90 minutes, includes numerous show-stopping turns by Wayne that are faithful to the arrangements of Sylvester and his Two Tons Of Fun singers yet never feels like mimicry. It ends of course with the lyrically silly but musically unstoppable "Dance (Disco Heat)" and the undeniable classic "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)."

Site-specific settings are all the rage and it's easy to see this show could have a strong Off Broadway run in an actual disco where the floor was lit up like Saturday Night Fever, where the audience could drink and boogie to disco-era classics for half an hour before the show began and where they could stand and shake their booties

throughout rather than have to sit down in a theater. Wayne, his ladies and the terrific band really do complete justice to the era and the spirit of Sylvester in this show with its heart in the right place and more importantly its music sounding as good as ever.

## **THIS IS OUR YOUTH** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\* **CORT THEATRE**

Does Kenneth Lonergan belong on Broadway? Talent-wise, of course he does. Lonergan is a distinctive voice on stage and film. But his work is shaggy, lumpy, and disarmingly low-key. Broadway may simply not be the setting to do justice to his plays. I've seen works like *Lobby Hero* and *The Waverly Gallery* in small theaters with great casts and never thought for a moment, why isn't this transferring to Broadway? They were right where they belong.

The same is not true unfortunately for *This Is Our Youth*, Lonergan's breakthrough work that I missed the first time around. Here it is with Michael Cera, Kieran Culkin and Tavi Gevinson, allowing Lonergan to make his Broadway debut. It's an amiable, amusing evening of theater. But one can easily imagine the sharper, tighter, more dangerous show it might be in a smaller space with a savvier cast.

The story is simple enough. Warren (Cera) is the disaffected son of a very powerful businessman in NYC. His dad is not a crook, but he does business with crooks, if you get the distinction. Warren's been kicked out of his dad's house (again) and decides to grab \$15,000 in cash as a parting gift. Where better to crash than the apartment of his friend and drug connection Dennis (Culkin), an egotistical "pal" who is constantly running Warren down when not feuding with his girlfriend over the phone?

It's 1982 so when Warren blows more than \$1,000 on a date with Jessica (Gevinson), it's truly a shocking amount of money. Dennis concocts several schemes to make up the difference once Warren realizes he has to return the \$15,000 or truly feel the wrath of his father. They can buy some coke wholesale and resell it and/or they can pawn off Warren's hapless collection of antique memorabilia -- toys from his childhood and other nerdy collectibles.

As directed by Anna D. Shapiro, this Steppenwolf production has a slack nature to it, one incident rambling on into the next and no sense of building tension. That's part of the problem: Warren and Dennis seem like blithe slackers, not the children of privilege they should. In fact even the setting and the costumes don't particularly evoke 1982.

It's a credit to Lonergan's writing that *This Is Our Youth* isn't burdened with dated references but there should be some indication -- beyond the lack of cell phones -- as to when the story takes place and who it involves. More crucially, the tension between Warren and Dennis also feels slack. There's no sense of danger that one of them might explode or even that they're in actual harm's way, despite the ODing of a friend and general air of menace one should sense. In 1982 New York City, even walking down the street could feel a little dicey, wealthy parents or not.

The heart of this production is Warren's awkward dance of romance with Jessica. I was quite prepared to discover that Gevinson was the weak link in this show and she's certainly not quite up there yet with Culkin and Cera. But she held her own and had as appropriate, awkwardly endearing way on stage. Cera was hilarious as he blurted out the wrong thing at the wrong time to her or tried to dance along to a record he'd put on the turntable.

But the big confrontation between Warren and Dennis? It passed by almost unnoticed. The sense of danger? That felt remote and unimportant, whether it was the danger from outside or from each other. Could either of these two guys genuinely hurt the other one, either physically or emotionally? No. The stakes were low and got lower as the night went on. While I've never seen *This Is Our Youth* or even read it before, surely that's not what

an ideal production would bring out. Nonetheless, Cera and Culkin are appealing presences on stage and the evening floated by rather pleasantly.

It was like cocaine that had been cut too much. You felt modestly buzzed but naggingly certain that somehow you'd been cheated a little bit as well.

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