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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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Theater: "Milk Like Sugar" Is Sweet; "Love's Labor's Lost" Is Playful, "Memory" Best Forgotten

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MILK LIKE SUGAR *** out of ****
LOVE'S LABOR'S LOST ** 1/2
THE ATMOSPHERE OF MEMORY 1/2 *

MILK LIKE SUGAR *** out of ****
PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZON

Milk Like Sugar is a familiar tale of young people struggling to break free from a cycle of poverty and hopelessness. But distinctive and funny dialogue, smart direction and an excellent cast can enliven any story.

Kirsten Greenidge's play begins with a bang as three high school girls strut onto the stage with all the attitude

and self-possession of pop stars. It's the birthday of Annie (Angela Lewis) and they're waiting outside a tattoo parlor, with Talisha (a very funny and focused Cherise Boothe) and Margie (a wittily dopey Nikiya Mathis) bantering over what sort of design Annie should get.

Margie is pregnant but rather than worrying about the stress and responsibility as a single mom, she's rhapsodizing over cool baby carriages, dope baby clothes and the like. Talisha -- who insists everyone start calling her "T" because she's so cool she doesn't even need her full name -- decides to join Margie in motherhood (it'll be fun!) and Annie is reluctantly dragged along into this baby mama pact. The dialogue is so funny and precise -- with Margie consistently judging every potential male by the status of his cell phone -- that this sad spectacle is convincing, hilarious and sad all at once. *Milk Like Sugar* is good, but

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it's never as good as it is in this first scene.

Slowly we're drawn into Annie's dilemma. She has a hardworking mother (a fierce Tonya Pinkins) who finds solace in filling a notebook with stories, so we know Annie can dream bigger dreams. But her shelves are filled with milk like sugar -- powdered milk instead of the real thing -- and to keep her friends she needs to keep her word. Will she do it with Malik (J. Mallory-McCree), the smart and polite senior who wants to go to college and loves looking up at the stars? Will it be with the sexy tattoo artist Antwoine (LeRoy McClain) who seems to have it all together? Or will Annie find religion via the awkward and earnest fellow student Keera (Adrienne C. Moore)?

Milk Like Sugar becomes less distinctive the further away it moves from that sharp-tongued almost satirical opening. But the talent on display is too good to ever let your attention wander. Lewis is nicely tentative as she struggles to express the confusion and desires in her heart. Mallory-McCree has the most thankless role as the do-gooder Malik; despite a modest edge to his passion, Malik is merely an idea of escape. McClain on the other hand makes Antwoine fully realized and not so dangerous as you might expect.

Pinkins nails her scenes with authority though Annie has so much stacked against her it feels like cheating when Annie's mom switches from beaten-down to mean. In the same way, the show builds to a rousing climax where the walls -- a distinctive element in Mimi Lien's strong but spare set design -- are literally closing in on her. But then the show retreats to a softer epilogue where the fates of all the characters are spelled out and we're given two or three reasons to hope for the best. Toni-Leslie James had a blast with the costumes, the sound design and original music by Andre Pluess is terrifically good, and the lighting by Justin Townsend keys the changing emotions with ease.

Above all, director Rebecca Taichman mines the material for all its worth. The scene changes in particular show her inventiveness and focus. Chairs and other props are moved on and off by characters but Taichman uses those silent moments to have different actors react and play off of each other in meaningful, telling ways. All the talent raised their game and gave the words of Greenidge the best possible showcase.

LOVE'S LABOR'S LOST ** 1/2 **THE PUBLIC THEATER**

The Public Lab is one of the best bargains in town with \$15 tickets to new plays and classics given an enthusiastic airing by fresh talent. This production of *Love's Labor's Lost* is a good example: it's a pretty good retelling of Shakespeare's romance with enough good performers on display to make you forgive any inconsistencies or ideas that don't quite pan out.

Karin Coonrod has certainly staged this play with energy: the actors are literally running around the entire theater, acting on the stairs, the walkways behind the audience and occasionally even on the stage itself, which is a modest affair with a patch of green in the middle and little else. The King Oof Navarre (a fine Hoon Lee) wants to devote himself to study and convinces three friends to take a pledge and avoid even the sight of women, much less any pleasure, while doing so. Berowne (an excellent Nick Westrate) is



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the only one to speak out against such lunacy but he's soon cajoled into going along.

Needless to say, a delegation from France soon arrives with beautiful women galore and each and every man falls in love with a woman from the Princess Of France (a good Renee Elise Goldsberry) to Rosaline (Rebecca Brooksher, who matches Westrate in wit and charm) on down the line.

On the side we have the clowns with their own lovelorn tales of woe. As I often find, the clowns are most enjoyable when played least dumb. Reg E. Cathey (of *The Wire*) has some silly prattling about but when allowed to speak from the heart with seriousness he is quite strong. Similarly, Robert Stanton is most effective in his dual roles when least foolish.

The clowning is not the show's strong part and certain ideas are raised and then dropped. A Puck-like page (Samira Wiley) can stop the action of the show and cause mischief, but this is merely revealed in the beginning and then randomly used to no effect throughout. The scene in which the clowns perform a play for the nobility is turned quite nicely into something dark: as the fools are mercilessly mocked by the men, their prospective mates see these mean moments as petty and seem to turn on the men. But this emotion leads nowhere.

Still with two leads who shine, *Love's Labor's Lost* is buoyed by their pleasure: Westrate holds the stage with ease time and time again, while Brooksher gives him a prize worth the winning. Francis Jue is good in his smaller role of the curate Sir Nathaniel and Stephanie Dimaggio makes positively the most imaginable out of the tiny role of Jaquenetta. A grunt here, a puzzled question there and she's created a wholly memorable character that never wavers. *Love's Labor's Lost* has a consistent buoyancy but it's not quite as strong-willed as Jaquenetta. Still with Westrate and Brooksher front and center, it never feels like work.

THE ATMOSPHERE OF MEMORY 1/2 * **BANK STREET THEATER**

Playwright David Bar Katz's new work is an exhausting story about a playwright who has written a family drama based on his own painful childhood. He casts his actor girlfriend as his sister and then casts his mother (a retired actress played by Ellen Burstyn) as his mother and when his ne'er do well father (John Glover) steamrolls into town, yelling and arguing and hashing out of old memories ensues. None of it is interesting.

The play is filled with so many inconsistencies and confusions that they're too numerous to mention. To focus on one key moment, the playwright (Max Casella) spent his childhood tape recording every family conversation and transcribing them into notebooks. They fill literally dozens of black school composition books with key moments from his parents' endless bickering. He takes one of those notebooks and confronts his father with the moment when dad meanly told his son he was going to leave for good unless the kid could give him some reason to stay. This is meant to force Glover to face up to his meanness and cruelty. The only problem? Glover's dad relishes his meanness and cruelty. He doesn't need to be forced to admit it -- he loudly proclaims it every minute. He insults and demeans everyone around him every minute of every day and gleefully acknowledges it. So what possible cathartic moment could the son be hoping for? His dad KNOWS he's a prick; it's in fact his defining characteristic. He would be upset if you didn't think he was a prick. So this hoped-for powerful moment has zero impact since it doesn't reveal anything the dad and we don't already know.

Glover leads with his crotch in this show (if you saw his performance, you'd know what I mean) and in some inexplicable way manages to create a genuine character. It helps that he has the meanest, most vivid bits of dialogue. In the fuzziest role of the mother who is both less and more than she seems, Burstyn like everyone else struggles and fails to make sense of the show -- and the even worse show within a show that we catch glimpses of. Melissa Ross somehow gins up some emotion as the sister, which is a small miracle. But these are small passing moments of interest and not nearly enough to rescue the work.

All the tech elements are out of kilter because they are desperate to do something with a floundering work. Adam Schlesinger of the marvelous *Fountains Of Wayne* devises desperate cues in his score that can't create drama where none exists. The set feels random and director Pam McKinnon (soon to be seen on Broadway with an acclaimed revival of *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf*) is at a loss. A couch is the main bit of furniture and it's rotated this way and that with sometimes the actors standing in front of it and sometimes behind it and sometimes even to the side of it to no effect.

One scene brings the show to life. For whatever reason, the play and the play within the play are utterly



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unconvincing but the notebooks -- the bits of dialogue from the playwright's childhood -- are far more interesting and focused and real than anything else in the show. When the family sits down and reads out loud a scene from the past -- a scene in which the daughter is humiliated after having her period -- for a moment, a brief moment, *The Atmosphere Of Memory* starts to come to life. It works again whenever those notebooks are read from by anyone in the show, moments which are all too few. Whatever freed the playwright up when creating that dialogue from the past is unclear. but that's clearly the place he needs to return.

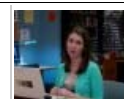
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All's Well That Ends Well/Shakespeare in the Park **
The Atmosphere Of Memory 1/2 *
Broadway By The Year: 1997 ** 1/2
Crane Story **
Cymbeline at Barrow Street Theatre ***
Follies *** 1/2
Hair ***
Hero: The Musical * 1/2
Lake Water **
Love's Labor's Lost at the PublicLab ** 1/2
Man And Boy * 1/2
Master Class w Tyne Daly ** 1/2
Measure For Measure/Shakespeare in the Park ***
Milk Like Sugar ***
The Mountaintop ** 1/2
Newsies **
Olive and The Bitter Herbs ** 1/2
One Arm ***
Relatively Speaking * 1/2
The Select (The Sun Also Rises) ** 1/2
Septimus & Clarissa *** 1/2
Silence! The Musical * 1/2
Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark * 1/2
The Submission **
Sweet and Sad **
Unnatural Acts ***
We Live Here **
Zarkana **

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Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Wild Prairie Dame *** 1/2
Central Avenue Breakdown ** 1/2
Crazy, Just Like Me ***
Cyclops: A Rock Opera *
Ennio: The Living Paper Cartoon ** 1/2
F---ing Hipsters **
Ghostlight **
Gotta Getta Girl ** 1/2 for staged reading
Greenwood *
Jack Perry Is Alive (And Dating) * 1/2
Kiki Baby ** 1/2
Kissless * 1/2
Madame X **
The Pigeon Boys ***
Time Between Us * 1/2
Tut **

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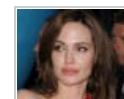
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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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