

Theater: Murder For Two; NYMFC #4 Orphans, Olympians and Onanism!

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NYMF: BEND IN THE ROAD *** 1/2
NYMF: VOLLEYGIRLS *** 1/2
NYMF: HOMO THE MUSICAL no stars
MURDER FOR TWO: A MUSICAL COMEDY **

The **New York Musical Theatre Festival** has just drawn to a close and I already miss it. It featured some 50 different events, including fully staged musicals. I saw 12 of them (along with a reading of another starring Anthony Rapp) and either I just got very lucky in my picks or this year is the best yet for **NYMF**. Several of their shows over the years have made their way to Broadway. I wouldn't be surprised at all if one or two from this year made that same journey. And Off Broadway and regional productions are surely in store for more. It's very hard to create a show worth mounting. It's even harder perhaps to go that last mile and turn a promising show into a great one, but these shows have the right ingredients to make the effort worthwhile. I'll be keeping an eye out for all of these in the future: *Bend In The Road*, *Castle Walk*, *Crossing Swords*, *Mata Hari in 8 Bullets* and *Volleygirls*. I want to see them all again; to be able to say that about five out of 12 shows is pretty amazing. Now here are my reviews of the three last shows I caught.

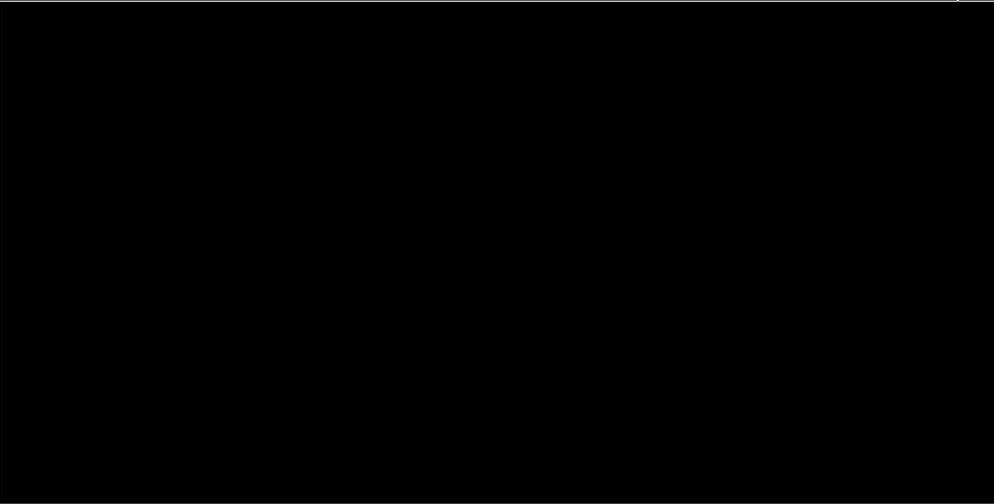
NYMF: BEND IN THE ROAD *** 1/2
NYMF AT PEARL THEATRE COMPANY

Anne Of Green Gables and the many sequels that followed are a beloved series of books by Lucy Maud Montgomery. (Is there any other way to describe them other than "beloved"? Well, after one or two fall into a formula -- Anne comes to new town and with her plucky spirit brings lovers together, opens up closed hearts and wins everyone over -- they built on the original's freshness by following its heroine through life in a sweet, unaffected manner.)

The story of talkative little orphan Anne Shirley who comes to the rural town of Prince Edward Island has been adapted into feature films, TV movies, a classic TV series, animated movies, stage plays and of course numerous musicals. One musical version is staged every year in Canada and toured the world, including briefly the West End. I can't speak to it since I've never seen it or heard the cast album. But I'm certain few versions have so successfully captured the charms of the original the way *Bend In The Road* already does. With some refinements, it surely deserves to make its way to Broadway, the home of girl-friendly musicals.

And if they're very lucky, it will happen soon enough so that Alison Woods can play Anne. This young actress has a lovely singing voice and sets just the right tone as the hyper-imaginative, stubborn, but essentially adorable Anne with an "e." But kudos to the casting of Michael Cassara, who has surrounded her with talented performers just right for this show.

Take the crucial first scene where we really get to know Anne. She's just been dropped off by train from an orphanage. It's a bit of a screw-up: brother and sister Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert "ordered" a boy to help them on the farm and suddenly here is this red-headed little girl. Of course they have to take her home for the night and Matthew (Martin Vidnovic) and Anne make the buggy ride home to Green Gables while singing "Anne With An E." Matthew is overwhelmed by Anne's non-stop chatter -- he's a farmer, a man of few words who sinks into pleasant silence for hours at a time, one imagines. Anne is all-abuzz; what's this? What's that? Though Matthew says virtually nothing through the ride, we see him looking abashed, bemused and slowly falling hard for the charms of this willful child. It's a beautiful piece of acting and crucial to establishing Anne's character. He's matched by Woods, who never overplays Anne, never going for humor but letting it flow naturally out of her passionate exclamations. Here in one well-crafted scene (the book is by Benita Scheckel, the music by Michael Upward and they both wrote the lyrics) you get to the heart of the books and what makes them so enduring.



(The video is of an earlier staging that doesn't match the one I saw.)

Director Benjamin Endsley Klein is in full control throughout, aided by strong tech work, including the scenic design of Lauren Helpert, costumes by David Kaley, lighting by Joel E. Silver and sound by A&L Sound Partners.

Maureen Silliman shines as the busybody neighbor Rachel Lynde. (The actress's name couldn't be better for playing this character.) Her pushy ways keep Marilla (Anne Kanengeiser) from following her head and instead giving in to her heart. Before you know it, Anne is ensconced at Green Gables and having adventures, whether it's making a new best friend with Diana (Whitney Winfield) or sparring with Gilbert (a very appealing CJ Pawlikowski), the smartest, most handsome boy in school.

Strong moments abound. Kanengeiser as Marilla is perhaps the most crucial casting outside of Anne and she too is pitch perfect, whether making a cutting remark, trying to remain stern while amused by Anne's outbursts or teaching the child how to pray (a lovely musical setting for "The Lord's Prayer"). Winfield is a good counterbalance as Anne's friend and Pawlikowski makes their transition from rivals to friends to potential lovers perfectly believable. Of course front and center is Woods as Anne and she's a delight, singing beautifully, behaving spunkily and always keeping Anne real. She mines the humor without ever reaching for it and that makes all the difference.

A late spooky scene and song "The Haunted Wood" is especially well-staged. It somehow creates a scary, affecting moment with just a little lighting, some effective music and having the cast onstage standing in two lines with their backs to the audience while Anne lets her over-active imagination scare her for real. It's pure theater, with no need for elaborate effects to achieve its goal. Indeed, *Bend In The Road* would be most welcome on Broadway for its lack of smoke and mirrors, not to mention a sweet nature that is heart-warming without being simplistic or treacly. Wholesome doesn't have to mean dumb.

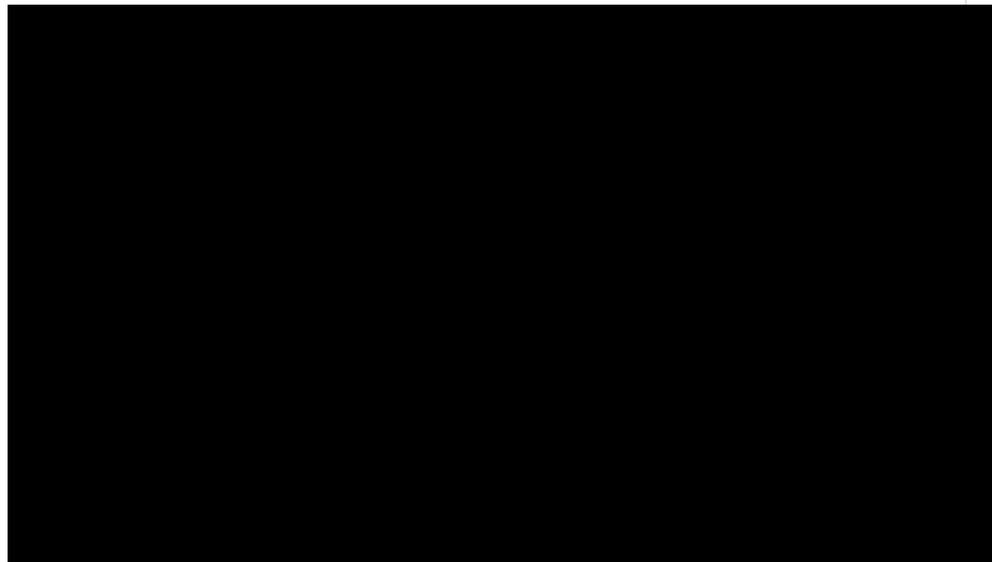
As for what needs work, the finale is a bit rushed. We get high school graduation, Gilbert taking over as teacher of the school, Marilla deciding to sell the farm, Gilbert giving up his position so Anne can take it and her remaining in town at Green Gables - not to mention Gilbert declaring his affections and all of it in about five minutes. It's hard to feel much tension when Green Gables is put up for sale in one sentence and rescued in the next. Plus, I missed the growing fondness between Anne and the busybody Rachel, which we didn't get a chance to see. They go from enemies to pals in one fell swoop and it would be nice to indicate how that happened.

Most crucially, the first and last numbers in the show are radically different from the direct, winning songs throughout. Both "A Home For Me" and the finale "Bend In The Road" (with a reprise of "Walk Like Sisters") are full-on productions featuring the entire cast with multiple characters singing multiple parts often at the same time a la *Les Miserables*. Their cluttered arrangements are just as elaborate and overwhelming. Again and again in the show, winning songs like "Math and Mayhem," "That Girl," "What Do You Call A Boy/Girl" and "Walk Like Sisters" have strong melodies and lyrics that belie their sophistication. They're simple and direct and charming, just like Anne. So the elaborate opener and finale aren't just unsuccessful in their own rights, they're also counter to the entire spirit of the show. Find the heart of those moments without all the grandness of a "big" opening or ending and *Bend In The Road* will have the scene setter and finale this delightful production deserves.

After the drudgery that was *Lysistrata Jones* and *Bring It On*, you can forgive people for being wary of yet another sports-based musical. But *Volleygirls* is everything those shows were not. It's clever, well-written, filled with strong songs and great characters, well-acted and -- crucially -- presents the sport of volleyball in theatrically clever terms that don't leave you worried whether an actress who can sing and dance will also prove capable of convincingly spiking the ball. If it hadn't been done so poorly so recently, you might not realize what an accomplishment this winner is.

The set-up is familiar. The female volleyball team may be struggling but temporary coach Flo Hartline (Jennifer C. Johnson) is still angry to find she's being replaced by the English teacher Kim Brindell (Susan Blackwell). Turns out Kim is a former Olympian, a notorious choker who made history the wrong way by catching the service on match point, losing the tournament and scoring millions of views on YouTube in the process. Her notoriety was so great that Kim changed her name and swore off volleyball forever. But the principal (Benjamin Howes) went to college with Kim (whose nickname was "The Beast") and he knows she can turn the team around.

First, she has to win over the girls. Their best player is the principal's daughter Katie (Juliane Godfrey) but she fights with everyone because they think she gets special treatment and she thinks they all hate her. Marisol (Gerianne Perez) is a lesbian, the towering Ingrid (Julia Knitel) is too timid to take advantage of her physical gifts, Stretch (Dana Steingold) is the shortest member of the team and dreams of spiking the ball but usually just offers an amusing quip while cheekily calling all the adults by their first names. Will Kim turn the team around? Will Flo undermine her authority, convince the PTA to fire her or tell the world about her Olympic shame? Will Marisol and the red-headed Jocelyn realize they both like each other that way? Will they win the big game? Do you have to ask? Have you *never* seen a sports movie before?



Xavier (PJ Adzima), our way into the game of volleyball. He's assigned to cover the team and becomes a passionate fan, falling hard for Jess in the process. It seems rude amongst so many talented women to begin with a man, but truth be told he steals the show as Xavier, getting in touch with his inner cheerleader, narrating the action with infectious delight and singing the show's best song, the funny and romantic "You're Beautiful When You Play." If someone is looking to cast *The Neil Patrick Harris Story*, you've just found your man.

He's matched by a great cast that brings to life these admittedly familiar and clichéd roles with ease. (Kudos to Lindsay Levine and Tara Rubin on the casting.) The smart book that deftly creates these roles and gives them enough specificity to make them more than clichés is by Rob Ackerman. The music is by Eli Bolin and the lyrics by Sam Forman and their songs have a lot of winners, including "This Is Volleyball," "I Like Girls," the act one closer "Jabali," and "This Stupid Game," to name a few.

Ryan Kazprzak does a great job on the choreography, including the clever touches that let them reenact volleyball games, from the slap of their hands that signal a ball has been served to the rousing dances that show them coming together as a team. Bringing it all together is director Neil Patrick Stewart, who has delivered a genuine crowd-pleaser with heart.

You can't fault the acting. It's very strong, with Steingold especially funny in comic relief, Perez winning in the this-side-of-cliche role of the fiery Latina and Godfrey hitting the right level of anger in her role as the disaffected Katie. She never overplays her anger and so it's both convincing and all the more touching when she gives ground. The villain of the piece is Flo and Johnson is terrifically good. Again, she's

never a cartoon villain. The book doesn't make her unreasonably hateful or motivated by some stupid animus; she's just a misguided mom with misguided priorities for her child. That makes her all the more scary and Johnson really knocks it out of the park with her big number "Animal In Our Midst."

I really enjoyed the cast as is and their chemistry is crucial to the show's success. However, it must be noted that Blackwell and Howes are not the strongest singers. **Blackwell is devoted to education and encouraging creativity in her many projects** so she clearly feels the drive to teach in her bones. Godfrey, as Katie, is also not a belter. Their acting carries much of the show's drama, but when they duet or sing as a trio towards the end of act one (on "The Beast That You Used To Be" and "I'm In Hell") one can see room for improvement in that area.

Does it belong on Broadway? As far as quality is concerned, if those two earlier shows went there it surely does. But it's a shame the economics of Off Broadway can't be worked out so that a show ideally suited to a small venue with a fresh-faced cast of newcomers like this could be financially successful and run for ages. Wherever it ends up, you'll discover a talented creative team to keep an eye on and a lot of appealing performers.

NYMF: HOMO THE MUSICAL no stars **NYMF AT PEARL THEATRE COMPANY**

This witless musical offers a broad satire of suburbia: a happy family of seeming Ozzie and Harriet wholesomeness is soon revealed to be riddled with hypocrisy and sexual desire. The preacher father -- who laboriously counsels to be afeared of "the devil's hole," the anus -- is of course a closet case who fantasizes about sex with Jesus. (That might be scandalous if it were remotely amusing.) Mom pops pills; the son is also gay and the daughter slaughters her schoolmates when they reject her. They already seem ripe for an *American Beauty*-style meltdown, but an alien comes down to supplant mom and push everyone to revel in their true natures.

The book by Lola Rock-N-Rolla and lyrics by Gina Volpe (who also did the music) traffic in the most tired cliches. When the preacher is so transparent and bizarre as to talk about "holy douches" it's really not so remarkable to have him revealed as wanting to practice what he preaches against. It's directed capably enough by David Drake. But the scenic design and projections by Jason Lee Courson and the costumes by Karl Ruckdeschel take their cues from the book and songs and go for the most obvious gags every step of the way.

Despite these dire circumstances, it's still possible to see the talented people involved doing their best. The melodies by Volpe are the strongest part of the musical and have a genuine kick (thanks to a solid band including Jason Bozzi on guitar). As the daughter Suzie, Blair Goldberg has some funny moments, especially when she declares she's a mass murderer and her parents can only talk about their son being gay. As Billy (and other characters), J. Alexander Coe is an affable presence with a bemused outlook and sexy appeal. As the object of his affection, Christopher Trepinski certainly offers a lot to lust after. Eric Gunhus anchors the show as the narrator and for a moment makes you believe it might actually be better than it seems.

But with paper tigers as its targets and an utterly conventional attitude to the world as hidebound as the one it believes it is satirizing, what can talented actors do? They will all hopefully appear in something better very soon.

MURDER FOR TWO: A MUSICAL COMEDY ** **2CONDSTAGE THEATRE**

This two-hander is dead simple in its conception and has unsurprisingly been touring the country for a while before making its New York City debut. Murder is afoot in this musical comedy and a would-be detective is called in to sort through all the suspects and discover the killer. The twist is that the police man Marcus is played by one actor (in this case the very charming Brett Rybeck) and all the others are played by another (the inexhaustible Jeff Blumenkrantz).

Both are composers in their own right and both actors jump on the piano to provide musical accompaniment when the other is singing. Props for the board game Clue are on display in the set designed by Beowulf Boritt, who also displays a silhouette of the grand home that is the show's setting in a clever way. That's about it for clever touches. Otherwise, we're given a predictably eccentric cast of characters and two actors who have fun jumping around the stage while goofing with the audience, playing off of each other and occasionally moving the plot forward as we slowly figure out who-dun-it.



(Photo by Joan Marcus)

Joe Kinosian did the music, Kellen Blair did the lyrics and they both wrote the book. Nothing is remarkably new here, so it's a pity they didn't push themselves further. Too often, they avoid the challenge of crafting a genuinely funny murder mystery and just fall back on the fact that it's being played by two actors rather than say eight. Jokes breaking down the fourth wall and calling attention to the stunt in progress abound. If the show did work with a full cast (and frankly, it would be unwatchable if staged that way), then it would be even better when imaginatively performed by just two. They have it exactly the wrong way around.

Luckily, they did get one thing right: the casting of the two leads. Blumenkrantz and Ryback are very good in their respective parts, with Blumenkrantz scoring especially strongly as a young female student falling in love with our hero. Ryback for his part has charm to spare. Most importantly, their chemistry with each other is excellent. Still, there's something very notable about the fact that the highlight of the show is not a song by the composers or some clever staging or the final revelation but simply watching these two talented men joke with each other at the beginning and end while riffing wordlessly on the piano.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)

Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **

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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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