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HUFF POST ENTERTAINMENT

Theater: Murder, Magic And Memories in Four New Shows

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A GENTLEMAN'S GUIDE TO LOVE & MURDER *** 1/2

TWELFTH NIGHT *** 1/2

KING RICHARD THE THIRD ***

LIES MY FATHER TOLD ME **

A GENTLEMAN'S GUIDE TO LOVE & MURDER *** 1/2

WALTER KERR THEATRE

Apparently, once a decade actor Jefferson Mays will find the role that's perfect for his mercurial, shape-shifting talent and explode on the stage as one of our brightest stars. In 2003, it was the one-man play *I Am My Own Wife*, which featured Mays in one of the best performances I will ever see during a lifetime of theater-going. Now, it's the silly, light fluff of this musical spin on *Kind Hearts & Coronets*. I love Ealing comedies and Alec Guinness as much as the next person, but that film in particular always felt like merely a stunt to show off Guinness in multiple parts (all of them heirs to a grand title and all fated to die hilariously awful deaths). It was amusing but lacked depth. The book by Robert L. Freedman and music by Steven Lutvak (they collaborated on the lyrics) work together here to add some emotional resonance to the proceedings and that pays off dividends in Act Two.

But first we have the musical comedy playground of Act One. Our hero Monty Navarro (Bryce Pinkham, a dead ringer for Rufus Sewell and delivering a career-making turn) is the all but ignored member of the D'Ysquith family. His penniless, now-dead mother informs him of his noble lineage via a trusted servant. Navarro, it turns out, is an improbable eighth in line for the wealth and power and estate of the D'Ysquiths. He reaches out to them for a job, is spurned, and determines to knock them off one by one until the title, the estate and the glory are his and his alone, sweet revenge for his disinherited mother and not a bad way to get on for himself.

It helps that the D'Ysquiths are immediately presented as awful or silly or awfully silly, beginning with Lord Adalbert singing the dismissive "I Don't Understand The Poor." All of the fated-to-die D'Ysquiths (both male and female) are played by Mays with relish in rapid succession, often seemingly with one D'Ysquith speaking on stage left followed a moment later by another D'Ysquith popping up on stage right. (The dressers are Julian Andres Arango, Cat Dee, Amy Kaskeski and Tree Lonon and frankly they all deserve to take a bow at the end of the night, though if one of them works strictly with Mays they in particular deserve a special Tony.)

That song is typically amusing and clever, a light ditty without a terribly strong melody but like all the others here quite serviceable and fitting. And so the D'Ysquiths come and quickly go -- a fey bee keeper, a quivering and indifferent man of the cloth, a philanderer, an adventuress who embraces causes to get one up on her society friends and on and on. Our hero meets them and then devises a foolproof way to knock them off unless fate knocks them off conveniently for him. The funerals pile up, the list of heirs shrinks down

and Monty Navarro looks set to be the last man standing.



This show calls to mind *The Mystery Of Edwin Drood*, among others, and frankly it's almost astonishing this project began in America. (It should run in the West End for ages, whatever its fate here.) Essentially, this is a pretty good musical given a great production by all involved led by the excellent direction of Darko Tresnjak with choreography by Peggy Hickey that always delights.

The set design by Alexander Dodge artfully keeps the proceedings on a slightly off-kilter air and constantly reminds us this is a story being told -- the conceit is that Monty is writing his memoirs while in jail the night before he hears the verdict on whether he'll go free or die...ironically, for one of the few D'Ysquith murders he didn't commit. This framing device (sorry!) makes all the murder and mayhem easy to enjoy. It's a stage within a stage and a ramp leads out into the audience, making this one of the most intimate and fun musicals around.

The costumes (Linda Cho), the lighting (Philip S. Rosenberg) and the endlessly inventive hair and wigs (Charles LaPointe) all combine to allow Mays to deliver his tour de force turn as seemingly half the people on stage. The other half was cast exceptionally well by Jay Binder and Jason Styres of Binder Casting. Every part is well sung, every actor well-suited to their various turns.

Lisa O'Hare as Monty's first love Sibella -- who spurns him for a safer bet then regrets her error as he rises in power and status -- is always good but gets better as the show goes on. Lauren Worsham is a delight from the get-go as Phoebe D'Ysquith with a wonderful operetta-like voice perfect for the Gilbert & Sullivan air the show is going for. Pinkham is a winning and strong-voiced lead throughout. I remember him from the acclaimed *Orphans Home Cycle* at Signature and here he is effortlessly holding the stage, sparring with Mays and wooing two women (and the audience) at the same time. Obviously, all the accolades will go to Mays but Pinkham should benefit with a wide-range of leading man possibilities in the years to come.

At the end of the first act, I thought the show had settled into a pleasant if repetitive rhythm: introduce another silly D'Ysquith, sing a ditty and then knock them off. It seemed *Gentleman's Guide* would be a perfectly enjoyable trifle I could recommend heartily, especially for Mays' antics.

But as so rarely happens in musicals, Act Two actually improved on things. Once they dispensed with most of the D'Ysquiths, Freedman and Lutvak dug deeper and created some real emotional conflict for their hero. By far the best musical theater number of the evening was "I've Decided To Marry You" with Monty suddenly hosting both Sibella and Phoebe at his bachelor pad and desperately trying to keep both women apart. It's physical comedy, witty character development high drama (Monty seems in greater danger here than during any of his crimes) and the most fun of the night.

That's followed by the best piece of comedy of the evening: a dinner party hosted by Lord Adalbert D'Ysquith (Mays, natch) and Lady Eugenia (Joanna Glushak). They ride

roughshod over their guests, treat the servants like unloved dogs and literally hiss and growl and spit at each other in a symphony of marital discord that is hilariously over the top and very very funny.

The fact that Freedman and Lutvak delivered the evening's best moments when they escaped the high concept set-up of this musical -- and that one high point was musical and the other dramatic -- leads me to believe that this amusing evening of tomfoolery will lead to shows even richer and better in years to come from this team.

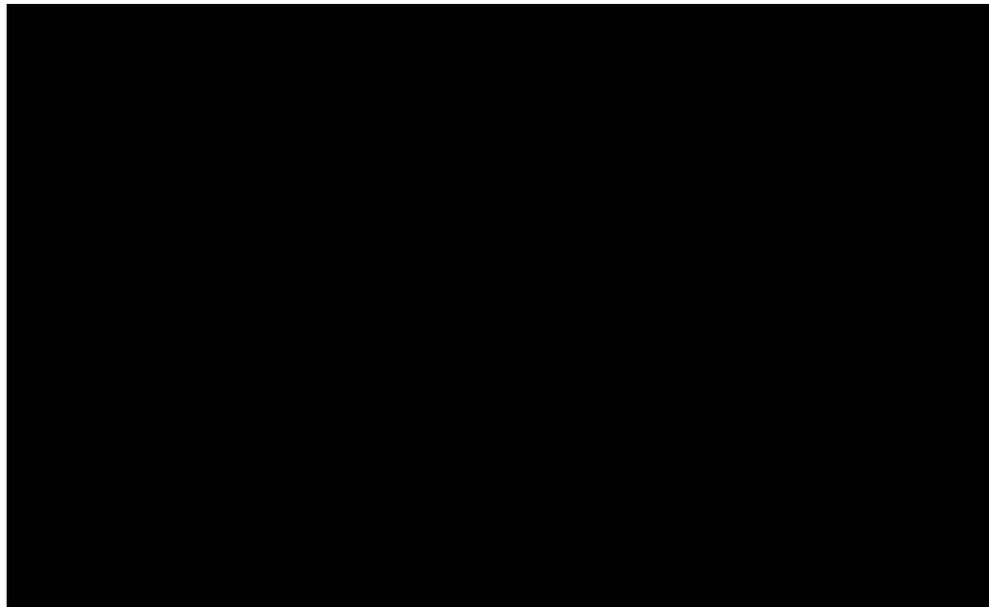
TWELFTH NIGHT * 1/2**

KING RICHARD THE THIRD ***

BELASCO THEATRE

I would go anywhere, pay any price to see actor Mark Rylance on the stage. If for nothing else, his stewardship as the artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe from 1995 to 2005 would endear him to theater lovers forever. Now his triumphant return to the Globe with dual productions of the comedy *Twelfth Night* and the tragedy *King Richard The Third* done in repertory with an all-male company has traveled to Broadway. I grade Rylance on a curve -- and not the nice one. I expect a transforming night of theater so I'm harder on his shows than anyone else. By that rigorous standard, his *Richard The Third* is merely solid and good. (I felt his buffoonish Richard didn't lead anywhere unexpected by the end of the show.) His *Twelfth Night* is lighter than air and delightful, with superlative direction from Tim Carroll and an excellent cast.

I was lucky enough to see the shows back to back over two evenings and the pleasure of seeing these actors in such varied surroundings can't be over-estimated. If you can, see *Richard The Third* first and *Twelfth Night* second. If you can truly only see one, go for the comedy. But you'd be a fool to miss Rylance and this company. And by all means, don't hesitate to grab the cheap seats for sitting on stage. The lower level in particular is great fun and the shows are performed in a way that makes those audience members feel like they're not missing a thing.



You won't find any modern settings for these plays. The costumes by Jenny Tiramani are period-exact, down to the pleasure of watching the actors get sewn into their outfits on stage before the show begins. Her set mimics the design of the Globe in London as much as possible, with two doors for entrances and exits and a high perch above for the musicians playing period appropriate instruments. On both sides of the stage are two-tiered seating for about 30 audience members. (No trip to London, by the way, is complete without at least one trip to the Globe to see what's on offer.)

So no elaborate sets or high concept: they simply deliver the words of Shakespeare with clarity and purpose, with men playing women as in Shakespeare's time, though they're not playing "women" but characters who are women, which makes all the difference. Just assume anyone I don't mention is quite good, since the cast is so exceptional.

They are led by Rylance, who stutters and stammers and gets more laughs out of an "oh" than anyone you're ever likely to see. His Olivia in *Twelfth* is a determined mourner who finds herself besotted with the messenger boy of one of her many suitors. Little does she realize that boy is a girl in disguise pining for her lost twin brother. When it's revealed Olivia's would-be love has an identical twin brother, Rylance's leap for joy is hilarious. His Richard in the tragedy is very entertaining, as Richard often is. He's buffoonish but fools almost no one; everyone steps away from Richard and his withered hand in fear. But his fall is too abrupt to be satisfying -- Richard is literally tripping over himself after gaining power -- and that keeps this from being a *Richard* for the ages. Still, he's fascinating in any role (oh, to have seen his Hamlet!) and this is no exception.

But he's far from the only pleasure. Samuel Barnett of *The History Boys* is so remarkably good as the youthful, willful Viola in *Twelfth* and the wary, regal Queen Elizabeth in *Richard* that I've half a mind to take Barnett in hand and insist he never tackle a trouser role ever again. When he spars with Rylance during the scene where Richard is making a play for Elizabeth's daughter, Barnett makes this dangerous dance both captivating and devastating for a mother who wonders what she's just bargained away as she does what she can to preserve her offspring one day more.

I never dreamt of seeing Stephen Fry onstage but here he is as Malvolio, taking a part often mined purely for laughs and giving a dark edge to the rosy finale of *Twelfth*. Peter Hamilton Dyer as Feste is one of the most engaging and weary-with-wisdom fools I have seen. Like so many others, he also does admirably well in *Richard* as both Brackenbury and Catesby. As Olivia's twin brother, Joseph Timms does well with the small role of Sebastian in *Twelfth*. But then he impresses fully as Lady Anne (and Grey) in *Richard*, especially in the wickedly awful scene where Richard woos her as she escorts to the grave the body of the husband he slew.

For the exception that proves the rule, Liam Brennan simply didn't bring to life Orsino, the Duke in love with the brooding Olivia. He delivers his lines clearly and directly and always seems... to take... ages...to do so. Rudely, I was glad to see him knocked off in *Richard*, though there again his pleas with the assassins took forever to unfold. For whatever reason, he didn't appeal. It's a small flaw in two otherwise good to great productions of Shakespeare that prove what a treasure the Globe and Rylance truly are. Miss him at your peril.

LIES MY FATHER TOLD ME **

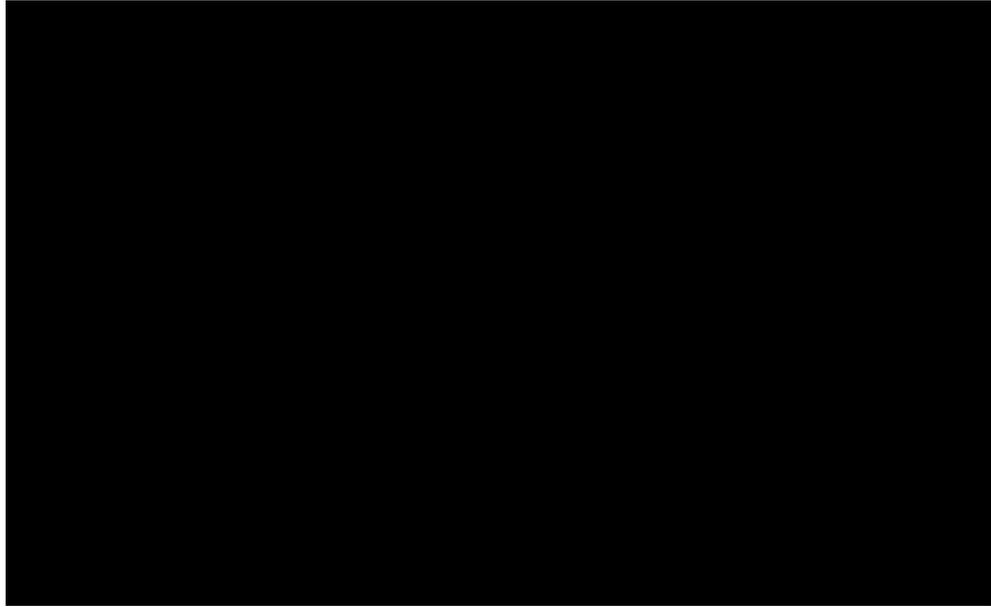
BARUCH CENTER FOR PERFORMING ARTS

Lies My Father Told Me began as a short story dashed off by Ted Allan in mere hours, became an Oscar-nominated film and then a novella and is now a new musical. Perhaps stories of immigrant Jews in Canada are not thick on the ground the way they are in the US because it gets revisited again and again, though perhaps that first attempt was the best way to tell this particular tale.

It focuses on David (Alex Dreier), a little boy growing up in Montreal during the 1920s. Adapted and directed by Bryna Wasserman with music, lyrics and orchestration by Elan Kunin, the show quickly sets the scene with the opening number "Rags, Clothes, Bottles," the calling card of David's lovable grandfather Zaida (a very good Chuck Karel).

We meet little David, his older and wiser self as narrator (Joe Paparella), that religious and indulgent grandfather, David's exhausted mother (Russell Arden Koplin), his irritable father (Jonathan Raviv) desperate for a get-rich-quick idea and local figures like the prostitute, a bickering neighbor who complains about the stink of Zaida's horse, a communist who spars amiably with the old man over politics and more. You get the idea: a warm, loving community where everyone doesn't always get along but they do get on,

even during hard times.



Unfortunately, that opening number is the high point of the show. This story is essentially a static one. Once you meet everyone in the neighborhood, you know everything you ever will about them. The prostitute loves kids and won't take any guff. The nag complains about the nag. David's dad pleads with Zaida for money to back his latest business scheme but can't ever be bothered to put in the hard work to make them happen. Yes, things happen -- mainly Zaida getting sick and dying -- but nothing and certainly no one changes here. The only surprise is how bitterly David views his father. True, the dad becomes nasty at the end when given full control over his family. But still it feels out of whack to view so scornfully the age-old tensions between a son-in-law who cares about money and has lost the faith with a father-in-law who is rich in wisdom and family but never cared much for money as an end to itself.

Just as the characters remain the same, the songs seem to repeat themselves as well. Zaida sings "Magic Wings," "When Messiah Comes," "Zaida's Lullaby" and "Blessed," and each one reinforces his sweet, religious outlook on life without revealing any more about Zaida than what we already know or moving the story forward. And those are the better songs, thanks to Karel's rich portrayal of the best character in the show.

"I'm Not Leaving" (the comic defiance of the prostitute Edna, played nicely by Leisa Mather) and "Bankrupt," in which little David excitedly runs around telling everyone his father is bankrupt in innocent joy because it means he won't have to move, get the second act off to a pretty good start. But even "I'm Not Leaving" simply repeats what we've already been told several times about Edna. And a little cute goes a long way. The show ends with "Lies," yet another song about the resentment of David toward his father, with nary a glimmer of empathy or a putting of things into perspective.

Dreier is very young and has a very demanding role and acquits himself decently, though one is always aware of him mechanically hitting his mark, counting off before raising his hands at the end of a song, thinking "okay, now it's time to lean back into Zaida's embrace" and other stage directions. He is by no means a problem with the show (the part is surely very hard to cast) but he's not exactly a strength either. Paparella has an excellent voice as the older David but he's dressed apparently by his bubala to look as sexless and non-threatening as possible. It doesn't help that he must spend most of the show lingering on the sides, watching the action with a wistful or angry look on his face.

The set design by John C. Dinning is impressive, as are the other tech elements like the costumes by Izzy Fields and the lighting by Natalie Robin. The opening number effectively and vividly introduces us to David's world. Unfortunately, the story basically starts and ends right there.

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 **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *
Women Or Nothing ** 1/2
Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play * 1/2
You Never Can Tell ***
Romeo And Juliet *
Arguendo **
August Wilson's American Century Cycle ****
The Glass Menagerie ** 1/2
Lady Day * 1/2
Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse ****
Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical ** 1/2
Bronx Bombers * 1/2
Romeo & Juliet at CSC * 1/2
A Night With Janis Joplin **
The Winslow Boy ***
Juno And The Paycock **
How I Learned To Drive **
Fun Home **
Two Boys at the Met **
Big Fish **
A Time To Kill * 1/2
Year Of The Rooster ***
The Snow Geese ** 1/2
A Midsummer Night's Dream ** 1/2
The Lady in Red Converses With Diablo ** 1/2
After Midnight ***
La Soiree ***
Nothing To Hide ** 1/2
The Patron Saint Of Sea Monsters **

Die Frau Ohne Schatten/The Woman Without A Shadow at the Met

Little Miss Sunshine **

Souvenir ** 1/2

A Gentleman's Guide To Love & Murder *** 1/2

Twelfth Night *** 1/2

King Richard The Third ***

Lies My Father Told Me **

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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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