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Theater: Musical "Carrie" Is Bloody Serious; "Assistance" Needs Some

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CARRIE ** 1/2 out of ****
ASSISTANCE ** out of ****

CARRIE **1/2 out of ****
MCC AT LUCILLE LORTEL

The last thing you want to do is pick on *Carrie*. This (in)famous musical has lived on in theater lore as one of Broadway's biggest flops. As often happens, serious theater buffs have always suggested a strong score was lost in the flames of that burnout. Now after many years,

a serious, somber new *Carrie* has emerged with some new songs, a new book, a new focus and the same old bucket of blood that made the movie and novel by Stephen King so iconic. Like the original Broadway *Carrie*, this show can boast two very strong performers in the lead roles of Carrie and her mother (Molly Ranson and the great Marin Mazzie). They are the central reason -- perhaps the only reason other than curiosity -- to see this show.

You know the story from the novel by Stephen King or the movie starring Sissy Spacek, Piper Laurie and John Travolta. Carrie is a frumpy teenager with two strikes against her: she has to deal with a repressive mother at home and bullying at school. Her mother has taken refuge in fanatical religious beliefs and a fear of intimacy ever since she was raped and made pregnant with Carrie. Her refusal to discuss anything physical explains why Carrie is completely confused when she has her first period in the girl's locker room, causing the other students to mercilessly make fun of her yet again.

Oh, and arriving with Carrie's "curse of blood" are telekinetic powers that she uses to move chairs, close windows and ultimately wreck a terrible revenge for the cruel way the other students treat her. It climaxes with the prom where Carrie wrongly believes everyone is mocking her (getting covered in a bucket of pig's blood will do that to you), snaps emotionally and telepathically destroys everyone in sight before a final showdown with her mother.

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The story is straightforward enough, though in this era of heightened awareness about bullying, it seems a mistake not to leave *Carrie* set in the 1970s. Other than some very brief references to cyber-bullying, there's nothing in the story that makes this *Carrie* feel contemporary. It's much easier to accept the cluelessness of teachers in dealing with bullying if the year was 1976. In 2012, bullying still takes place of course. But if only for legal reasons, the response of teachers and administrators would be very different.

A further problem is that this serious, quiet piece sometimes feels like an After-School Special about picked-on teens. The psychic powers are downplayed so much they seem held in abeyance until the grand finale. Someone unfamiliar with the story almost might not realize what's going on in that department, whereas in the book and movie *Carrie* is constantly battling to hold her psychic rages in check; that adds to the tension and ultimate tragedy.

Carrie's main tormentor is Chris (Jeanna De Waal) and in that character's big number, "The World According To Chris," we get not one but *two* reasons for her being so mean: she has an obnoxious father who constantly pushes her with his dog-eat-dog philosophy and it's implied that he might even physically abuse her. (I think it's implied; the lyrics are sometimes hard to discern with the amplification and sharp singing; my guest did not catch the same meaning from the references to whipping and scars that I did.) Couldn't she just be a mean, vindictive jerk?

But what really matters are the songs, with music by Michael Gore (including the score of course) and lyrics by Dean Pitchford. Just like their work on the movie *Fame*, they have produced one or two gems among other merely serviceable numbers.

The show begins with good girl Sue (Christy Altomare) being grilled by police after the inexplicable tragedy of the prom. This is a nod to King's book, which pretended to pull together newspaper articles, books, reports and other "documents" to tell the story of *Carrie*. But the very brief interludes with Sue being questioned ("We were only kids!" she pleads) offer absolutely no perspective or necessary information. It's barely returned to at the end of the show (and to no emotional impact) and should be dropped.

Then comes the opening number "In," with the students dancing vaguely like zombies while singing about the pressure to conform. It's spookily backlit like a horror show and would have been a much better opening on its own. The choreography by Matt Williams is at its best here. That's followed by "Carrie," with our heroine pretty fierce and self-confident from the start. She hardly seems like a wallflower you can push around, even here. The good kids come off most boringly, with Derek Klena in the role of Finn - I mean, Tommy -- who is given a poem set to music called "Dreamer In Disguise" that is all too convincing as the bad lyrics of a teenage jock trying to be sensitive. ("An eagle's just an eagle until he spreads his wings," for example.) That's followed by an even blander song by his girlfriend Sue, who feels bad about teasing *Carrie* and convinces Tommy to invite the poor thing to prom as his date. Their later duet "You Shine" is duller still, matched by the weak duet "Unsuspecting Heart" sung by a kindly teacher (Carmen Cusack good in a small turn) and *Carrie*.

As with the movie, almost everything interesting takes place at home between *Carrie* and her fanatical mother. At various points throughout the show, the vocal arrangements strive for an almost operatic feel, with performers beginning their lines shortly after one another until they join together on a chorus. The effect is more cacophonous than high art, unfortunately, with a number of duets and group songs rather hard to figure out musically and lyrically.

But the voices of Ranson and Mazzie blend beautifully and give this musical a depth and impact it would otherwise sorely lack. They shine on "And Eve Was Weak," "Evening Prayers," and "I Remember How Those Boys Could Dance." The songs aren't great, but Mazzie and Ranson make the most of them with their conviction and strong voices. The one truly satisfying, theatrical moment of the evening occurs when *Carrie* has defied her mother (not so hard to do when you can unnerve her with supernatural powers) and gone to the prom. On a darkened stage, Mazzie sings "When There's No One," a song that avoids the fanaticism of her earlier numbers to reveal the painful loneliness and fear at the heart of Margaret's behavior.

Ranson gives as good, though she rarely has the material that can let her truly shine as she might. At the finale, Ranson echoes the sappy poetry of Tommy by singing the line about an eagle being just an eagle till it spreads its wings and she raises her arms like a bird with her fingers curled into menacing claws. It might have had serious impact if she didn't have to reprise numerous other songs from the show at this crucial moment.

Less crucial is the destruction of the school. Everyone who knew I was going wanted to learn how the slaughter would be staged. Not surprisingly, it's theatrical, not literal for the most part. If the story was moving you emotionally, it wouldn't matter how the killings were staged; they would still have an impact. Since most of the students are fairly generic, all the fireworks in the world won't make the scene work on a dramatic level. For the record, it involves some effective visual displays of flames and whooshing sound effects before *Carrie* returns to the stage drenched in blood, just like you would expect.

Throughout, the digital displays smoothly change the scenes from locker room to darkened home to gym with minimal fuss. Director Stafford Arima wisely keeps the focus on the emotional heart of the story. It's a noble, serious effort. But with an unnecessary framework, too many characters flatly drawn and songs that don't dig deep enough, it's hard not to spend this *Carrie* waiting for the bloodbath to come.



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Here's the trailer from the Sissy Spacek/John Travolta film. (Note: King was such a new author, they spell his name wrong in the trailer!)

ASSISTANCE ** out of ****
PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS

Playwright Leslye Headland must be a joy to work with. She's managed to attract a top-notch cast to her rather tepid tale of assistants working for the proverbial boss from hell. The business is never identified, the boss is never seen, but the pattern of the play falls into a dull, predictable routine rather quickly, much like drudge work itself.

Two employees are seated at desks across the stage from each other. One is the chief assistant and the other is the backup. The chief assistant frantically deals with the unreasonable demands of evil boss Daniel while hoping to train the second assistant to take his or her place so he can get a promotion and move out of this living hell. That's about it. The assistants change places, sometimes one person moves on and other times a new scene begins and you realize the poor assistant is still trapped in their job. These vignettes are interspersed with solo scenes where an employee talks to someone else, maybe a parent or therapist, about their miserable existence.

Headland has a few funny quips and director Trip Cullman moves things along. But nothing can disguise the essential dramatic thinness of the proceedings. No one is particularly vicious or backstabbing (the worst complaint is maybe incompetence or dropping the ball despite their best efforts). Two assistants develop a romantic attachment and while it's true one of them was dating someone, basically there's nothing personal or professional blocking them from being together so it's hard to care when they struggle to maintain a connection.

Yes, the stakes are high -- people could and do lose their jobs and god knows the economy is bad enough to make finding a new one difficult. Yet no one faces any major ethical dilemma. They're all pretty much doing the best they can and despite some vague hints of Darwinian behavior, they all behave decently most of the time and don't try and screw each other over to get ahead. So where, exactly, is the drama?

The belief that this very light comedy has nothing to say is driven home by an utterly pointless, almost embarrassing finale in which one character begins to dance their heart out and the office comes "alive" with chairs spinning, copiers spitting out paper and water pouring from ceiling head sprinklers in a desperate attempt to end with a bang. Despite this (and despite the unearned nod to the *Thin Man* movies by calling the main characters Nick and Nora), the cast is strong throughout, with Michael Esper solid as Nick (despite a first scene weighted down by sub-Mametian dialogue) and Bobby Steggert scoring strongly in an all too brief turn. Virginia Kull also has moments as Nora, the richest role for the women in the cast; I look forward to seeing her in something better soon.

The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four star scale)

The Agony And The Ecstasy Of Steve Jobs ** 1/2
All-American **
All's Well That Ends Well/Shakespeare in the Park **
Assistance **
The Atmosphere Of Memory 1/2 *
Blood Knot at Signature **
Bob *** 1/2
Bonnie & Clyde feature profile of Jeremy Jordan
Broadway By The Year: 1997 ** 1/2
Carrie ** 1/2
The Cherry Orchard with Dianne Wiest **
Chinglish * 1/2
Close Up Space *
Crane Story **
Cymbeline at Barrow Street Theatre ***
Dedalus Lounge * 1/2
Early Plays (Eugene O'Neill at St. Ann's Warehouse) *
Ernani at Met w Angela Meade *** 1/2
An Evening With Patti Lupone and Mandy Patinkin ***
Follies *** 1/2
Fragments ***
Galileo with F. Murray Abraham **
The Gershwin's Porgy And Bess *** 1/2
Godspell ** 1/2
Goodbar * 1/2
Hair ***
Hand To God ***
Hero: The Musical * 1/2
How The World Began * 1/2
Hugh Jackman: Back On Broadway ***
Irving Berlin's White Christmas ***
It's Always Right Now, Until It's Later *** 1/2
King Lear at Public with Sam Waterston **
Krapp's Last Tape with John Hurt ***
Lake Water **
Leo ***
Love's Labor's Lost at the PublicLab ** 1/2
Lysistrata Jones *
Man And Boy * 1/2
The Man Who Came To Dinner **
Maple And Vine **
Master Class w Tyne Daly ** 1/2
Measure For Measure/Shakespeare in the Park ***
Milk Like Sugar ***
Mission Drift * 1/2
Misterman ** 1/2
The Mountaintop ** 1/2
Newsies **
Pigpen's The Nightmare Story *** 1/2
Once *** 1/2
Olive and The Bitter Herbs ** 1/2
On A Clear Day You Can See Forever * 1/2
One Arm ***
Other Desert Cities on Broadway ** 1/2
Private Lives **
Queen Of The Mist ** 1/2
Radio City Christmas Spectacular ** 1/2
Relatively Speaking * 1/2
Richard III w Kevin Spacey at BAM ***
The Road To Mecca ** 1/2
Samuel & Alasdair: A Personal History Of The Robot War ** 1/2
The Select (The Sun Also Rises) ** 1/2
Seminar **
Septimus & Clarissa *** 1/2
Shlemiel The First ** 1/2
Silence! The Musical * 1/2
69 Degrees South * 1/2
Song From The Uproar **
Sons Of The Prophet *** 1/2
Sontag: Reborn *
Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark * 1/2
Standing On Ceremony: The Gay Marriage Plays **
Stick Fly **
The Submission **
Super Night Shot ** 1/2
Sweet and Sad **
The Table ** 1/2

[Titus Andronicus at Public with Jay O. Sanders](#) * 1/2
[The Ugly One](#) **
[Unnatural Acts](#) ***
[Venus In Fur](#) ***
[We Live Here](#) **
[Wild Animals You Should Know](#) ** 1/2
[Wit](#) ** 1/2
[Zarkana](#) **

NEW YORK MUSICAL THEATRE FESTIVAL 2011

[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](#) **

FRINGEFEST NYC 2011

[Araby](#) *
[The Bardy Bunch](#) **
[Books On Tape](#) ** 1/2
[Civilian](#) **
[Hard Travelin' With Woody](#) ***
[Leonard Cohen Koans](#) *** 1/2
[The More Loving One](#) **
[The Mountain Song](#) *** 1/2
[Paper Cuts](#) ***
[Parker & Dizzy's Fabulous Journey To The End Of The Rainbow](#) ** 1/2
[Pearl's Gone Blue](#) ***
[Rachel Calof](#) ** 1/2
[Romeo & Juliet: Choose Your Own Ending](#) **
[2 Burn](#) * 1/2
[Walls and Bridges](#) **
[What The Sparrow Said](#) ** 1/2
[Yeast Nation](#) ***

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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