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Theater: NYMF #2 -- Friends, Hipsters & Pigeons

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The new musicals are coming from all sides now at the [New York Musical Theatre Festival](#) (or NYMF). That NYMF is pronounced "nymph," and musicals can be like that at this early stage -- coy, charming, and promising a lot more than they can ultimately deliver. That's especially true of readings. You might think a more fully staged show would have a better shot at winning your heart, but in fact the more fully complete they seem (and the longer their development history), the less slack you cut a show. A reading of a play or musical can send you

out into the night brimming with hope (imagine the sets! the costumes! the songs that haven't been written yet!) whereas a more fully realized version let's you deal with what is actually on the stage. On the other hand, once you've gone to enough readings, you learn how to spot the warning signs. So here are three more musicals, including one reading of a musical that showed that proverbial promise. Hope springs eternal.

F---ING HIPSTERS ** out of ****
SIGNATURE THEATRE

Poor Yoko Ono. Apparently it's going to take another 50 years (at least) before her name is not synonymous with breaking up a band. The super cool indie rock band Mark Twain's Moustache (not a good name, by the way) has it all: a loft in Williamsburg, Brooklyn; a devoted and growing fan base; and a small tour that just netted them some \$60,000. They're so together and with it that in the show's best scene, they overwhelm a record executive from Interscope by spelling out all the numbers in any potential deal he might offer and revealing they're much better off staying independent. Take that, aging record labels!

The show begins with them performing "Mean It (But I Don't) But I Do" a convincingly catchy number that you can believe is the song of a group on the cusp of bigger success. Then the geekily cool Evangeline (a sweet Heather Robb) tells lead singer Lars (Brandon Wardell) she's written a song (her first) and wants to perform it for him. We quickly realize she's declaring her love, though of course best pal Lars

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remains clueless to this for most of the show. That song -- "Hypothetical Girl" -- is a genuine winner, sweet and funny and catchy. Feist would be lucky to have it. You immediately settle back and think, ok, this is going to be good. Unfortunately, that's it for musical highlights from the show. (The lyrics are by Lori Scarlett and the music is by Scarlett and John Ballinger.)

But Lars and Evangeline get along like gangbusters with each other and the band's gay couple Tomatoes (Kyle Lamar Mitchell) and Buck (Luke Smith). This couple borders on painful cliché -- they buy \$200 moisturizer, head to the gym, celebrate an alterna-religion based on mixed drinks and Tomatoes is the wise voice of reason, honey. The two actors however, maintain their dignity and offer some sweet vocals in their short intro to the song "OMG!" when they thank God in prayer for silly things.

It all comes crashing apart when Josie (Emily Borromeo) comes to town. They catch her singing and rapping to "F---ing Hipsters" in a club, Lars falls hard (breaking Evangeline's heart) and before you know it, Josie is settled into their loft and borrowing thousands of dollars from Lars. This woman is clearly bad, bad news. When she tells them her life story of hatefully cruel adopted parents followed by a wildly abusive boyfriend who had her under lock and key for years, the tales were so over the top and ridiculous I actually laughed, assuming we were supposed to see right through her. Instead, her story was taken at face value by our wholesome but clueless gang.

Needless to say, Josie tears the band apart with her shenanigans and it takes a village (or at least fans and friends throughout Brooklyn) to set things right again.

Josie is a very confusing character. We first spot her at a club singing (not very well) a song; she's snagged a gig just minutes after arriving in New York City. You might rightly assume Josie -- an uber fan who wins the guys over with her deep knowledge of their music and even Evangeline's online musings -- will create havoc by getting Lars to have her start performing with them. Instead, the fact that she seems to want to be a pop star just like them is never mentioned again. Josie's stories and increasingly elaborate lies are so transparent the next logical alternative is that the other band members will voice their suspicions and infuriate Lars, who is blinded by love. Instead, despite a few modest protestations early on, they all accept Josie and repeatedly say how cool she is and how much they like and accept her. Their fights are not over this devious woman who is sucking Lars dry financially; their fights are over relatively mundane procedural moves as to how the band is run. Tomatoes seems to want them to follow Robert's Rules Of Orders even in a moment of crisis when an understandable suggestion -- let's put on a benefit concert! -- is treated as a betrayal. Again, shouldn't Josie be the reason for their split and not something unimportant like this?

Finally, we're rooting all along for the sweet Evangeline to triumph but it would be nice not to have to take her suitability for Lars on faith; we need more of a sense that they're really made for each other and he's dumb not to realize it. As it is, they seem more like brother and sister than lovers fated to be.

None of these plot issues would matter as much if the songs were better. After the first two, it's downhill, with "F--- On" particularly wasting a clever twist on "F--- off!" with a song that doesn't make use of it well. Plus, the main singers are not strong. Wardell as Lars should be a charismatic front man. He can handle the lower register decently, but whenever called upon to rock out or hit a high note, his thin voice can't deliver. Borromeo is also quite weak on her one big number. It's notable that after Evangeline's winning little ditty, the vocal highlights come from the gay sidekicks in a very brief passage...and from fans who join in on the band's hit song during the finale.

It doesn't help that none of the band plays instruments for most of the show; the music is mostly provided by performers off stage. The brief moments when Evangeline plays a xylophone and Lars strums a guitar have that much more power because the music is coming from them. If a cast that could rock out was found, it would help quite a bit.

The climax is ludicrous and there's a cheat in the costuming when we see Josie in hospital garb -- not fair, even if the show does want to retain an air of mystery about Josie's true nature. Finally, the heart of the story should be the band, not this con artist. So wasting the 11 o'clock number on trying to win the soul of this grifter feels like a seriously misplaced focus.

One assumes the actors were cast for their acting and in that category they come through, rescuing the ultimately confused book with their sincerity. Director and choreographer John Carrafa keeps things moving smoothly, even when the book gets bumpy. None of this can make *F---ing Hipsters* good, but it does make it watchable.

TIME BETWEEN US * 1/2 out of ****
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As this show starts, we hear classical-sounding vocalizing coming from backstage, which let's us know we are not in Rodgers & Hart territory right off the bat. That's fine, but the music by Brett Schrier and the lyrics by Schrier & Tess Barker (they also wrote the book) confuse the art song with a lack of melody. Throughout the show, it's hard to tell one song from another, with the modest exception of part of "The Perfect Wedding," which begins in a nicely comic mode and then devolves into art song territory again. (The score is performed ably by Schrier on piano and Ben Larsen on cello.)

The vocal lines are also very awkward. Time and again when our two leads should be duetting it sounds more like their voices are clashing discordantly. I blame not the performers but the songs they're asked to sing.

Those performers are Kristy Cates as Morgan and Kasey Marino as her gay best friend Matthew. They're best friends living in the heartland with aspirations for artistic success. She wants to work in fashion; he wants to be a photographer. We meet them fresh out of college and working as substitute teachers, still holding on to their dreams.

Matthew takes the plunge and heads to New York City whereas Morgan somehow lands a promising job in fashion of some sort right where they live. The pressures of work -- the long hours, the busy nights -- get harder and harder on Morgan until she decides she'd rather have a life and chooses marriage and family over fashion. Even when her talent was so good that she's offered an even better job, her husband pressures her to stick with teaching (no long hours there!) and raising the kids.

Matthew of course, makes a huge success in New York. A golden opportunity to shoot a magazine cover means he can't even make his best friend's wedding. He lives in a sterile apartment in the city all alone, even as he trots the globe on assignment and has his work displayed in the Louvre. Somehow, despite being a wealthy and world famous photographer, Matthew remains miserably alone. They drift apart, say hurtful things to each other, lose track but ultimately reunite and unconvincingly insist they've been rooting for each other all along. (In fact, we've watched them not root for each other for years and years.)

It all feels rather cliched; the woman forced to choose family over career (Morgan falls so far down that this fashion nut is reduced to wearing an oversized "I Heart New York" t-shirt and then drips ketchup on it) and the gay man who has no personal life. The show might have seemed a tad fresher if they'd switched roles and it was the gay man who adopted kids and stayed home and the woman who had a career. That wouldn't change the fact that the songs they sing leave no impression.

it doesn't help that Tom Rainey plays The Man, or as I thought of him The Voice of Doom. He walks onstage at funereal pace and ends scenes with a dramatically announced line such as (I paraphrase) "Do you really think you can accept that job and keep this family together?" The pace drags as well, with director Richard Amelius leaving awkward pauses between a number of scenes as they transition from one moment to the next. Despite all of this, Cates and Marino do manage to make their characters somewhat specific and give their friendship a believability that carries us through the very rough patches with a belief that something is genuinely at stake. *Time Between Us* may drag, but they do their best.

THE PIGEON BOYS *** out of **** TBG THEATRE

Essentially a staged reading of a new musical, this promising work tells the little known story of the men who trained and worked with homing pigeons used for communication throughout World War II, a thousands year old practice that would end after the war to end all wars thanks to modern technology.

It almost feels like a song cycle, with three men declaiming their part in the war and their love of the birds they care for -- one is the German Gunter (Ben Davis), one is the Brit Julian (Charlie Brady) and one is the New Yorker Sandy (David Perlman). (By the way, with the Brit called Julian, it's confusing to have the Yank also have a "soft" name like Sandy. Maybe something more ethnic or blunt for that regular guy feel?)

Gunter's songs are akin to classical lieder, with a certain martial air early on as he describes his dedication to his work. Julian has an early charmer of a tune when he sings about the girl back home and Sandy is just a guy crazy about birds and missing his folks and kid sister. Stylistically, Gunter's music has that operatic feel, with Sandy's more casual songs having a Broadway feel and Julian's musings falling somewhere in the middle. This unique identity for each character reflecting their countries could be brought out even more.



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A narrator was there to move the action along and at a fully staged production the pigeons would be shown via puppetry. I don't have a song listing, but they were quite strong throughout, as we discovered that Gunter was a disappointment to his father and determined to prove his worth and Julian yearning for his true love. Julian's song about the destruction of churches and precious pieces of art wasn't successful, but by and large the songs moved the story forward nicely and developed the men well.

The mission at the heart of the story was a little vague. Allied troops are trapped in an Italian mountain region called Colvi Vecchia and Julian and Sandy are asked to try and sneak by enemy lines via different paths so they can get a message out by pigeon and call for help. They have a better chance of getting through if they take two different routes and get as far away from enemy guns (and falcons) as possible since the pigeons are now targeted for death. Finally, about halfway through the show when they meet for this mission, the Yank and the Brit join in a duet.

The finale sums up beautifully the dangers the pigeons faced and the beauty of their flight in a song that all three characters join in on. Logically, it's understandable how the show might build from solos to a duet to that finale in which all three join their voices. But in fact that final number would make an excellent opening number -- it neatly spells out who the Pigeon Boys are and how dangerous their jobs were for the birds, not to mention nicely capturing the men's rapture over birds in flight. It really should be moved to the beginning of the show.

A flash forward early in the show -- in which the Yank can't make the time to meet up with an old Army buddy and is told the pigeon corp will be disbanded -- is quite unnecessary. That bit of info, if necessary, could be conveyed in a new final number, maybe one that shows the three men rhapsodizing over the birds and what it might be like to take flight, a nice metaphor for their souls taking flight after the ravages of war.

It all depends on the execution and how the birds are imaginatively created with puppetry down the road. Certainly the climactic action scene will be a big challenge to make convincing and moving. But they've already produced a number of solid songs, good characters and a story that's unusual to say the least. Credit goes to Anne Berlin for the book and lyrics and Andrew Bleckner for the music. They're ably assisted by the three actors who shape their characters well and sing the challenging but memorable numbers with elan. It will be fun to see if *The Pigeon Boys* can build on this sturdy framework.

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

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