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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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NYMF #4: Jazz, Kiddies, Camp, Tap, Tut and Vamps

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My final roundup of shows from the [New York Musical Theatre Festival](#). It's moving to July in 2012, which is great. Hopefully the shows and talent in them will get even more attention -- and I'll be able to see even more of them.

CENTRAL AVENUE BREAKDOWN ** 1/2 out of ****

KIKI BABY ** 1/2

GREENWOOD *

GOTTA GETA GIRL -- ** 1/2 for staged reading

MADAME X **

TUT * 1/2

CENTRAL AVENUE BREAKDOWN ** 1/2 out of ****

SIGNATURE THEATRE

Jazz great Lionel Hampton grew up in Chicago and moved to Los Angeles, where he achieved great success. So it's fitting that this musical with songs by Kevin Ray and a book by Ray & Josh Sohn (with an assist by Suellen Vance) should be named after a Lionel Hampton song that celebrates the street in LA where so much great jazz was played.

Unlike Hampton, Joe Marcel (a convincingly beaten-down Albert Christmas) doesn't flourish when he moves his wife Martha (a good Nicole Powell) from the Windy City to the City of Angels. Joe imagines it'll be easier to get ahead in the new scene forming there. But a blowing session in a club soon reveals Joe to be a "Competent Workman-like Player" and Joe resorts to music lessons to get by. but he's not

done with his dreams: he pours them into his two sons Bill and Jim. By the 1940s, the two young men are ready to make their mark.

The ambition of [Central Avenue Breakdown](#) is notable. We get a clear sense of Joe and Martha, watch his dreams get dashed and see the desire passed along to a new generation, all within the first half hour of the show. For a short while, I thought we'd see a battle between two styles of jazz: the bebop bubbling up slowly from the East, the hard-charging sound Jim favors (Roderick Covington) versus the mellow, never let them see you sweat sound of West Coast jazz that Bill (Ken Robinson) deploys. But no. Jim is clearly the true talent while Bill just sees playing music as a job and is happy to give the audience what they want.

You won't be surprised to discover that Bill flourishes early while Jim relentlessly explores the sound he knows is the future of jazz. Throw in a Hollywood starlet who loves jazz (and jazz men), as well as the hostile racial atmosphere generated by the LAPD and the lure of heroin and you've got yourself a show.

As the leads, Covington and Robinson are very good. Covington has a distinctive voice and makes Jim's driven nature thoroughly appealing, though he's less strong as an addict. Robinson limns a very clear path from an unassuming journeyman to a more confident and successful working musician to a genuine artist. The romantic angle gets a little lost. I thought the movie star Jane (Rebecca LaChance) was just a fan and friend, so that love story could be spelled out better. LaChance is more comfortable with the straightforward Broadway belting than the Annie Ross-style vocals she's called upon for at one point.

The musicianship is strong throughout, thanks to a crack band. Perhaps there is just too much story. The parents are such strong characters (and so well played by Christmas and Powell, who shines on "You Make It So Hard") that the movie star and heroin and all those other plot twists just get in the way of that family saga. A narrative bookend (in which a young female reporter comes into a club to ask about jazz) is also very unnecessary. Prune back and focus on that family and they might discover a much richer show than the somewhat overstuffed one that's here. With the talent on display on stage and off, it's worth the effort.

KIKI BABY ** 1/2

THE THEATRE AT ST. CLEMENT'S

If there were a best actress award at NYMF, Jenn Colella would surely win it for her work as the child star Kiki, a four year old girl with a crazily gifted voice who becomes a singing sensation in Europe a la Shirley Temple and the young Julie Andrews. Colella takes the stage as Kiki in a little girl's pinafore and quickly wins over the audience with goofy timing, a squeakily adorable voice and even singing with her tongue sticking out half the time, which seems impossible but there you go. It's a genuinely hilarious comic creation and the tone she sets keeps the show afloat throughout.

In 1931, Kiki's mother is desperate. Kiki's dad is in America trying to make a go of it during the Depression and the piece work of Christine (Jill Paice) is the only thing keeping she, her little girl and the child's grandmother alive. When the landlord threatens to kick them out, she is so desperate that the crazy plans of an impresario (Steve Rosen, a dead ringer to play Jon Lovitz's younger brother) to turn her little girl into a star actually seems like a good idea. All their friends in tenement become part of Kiki's team -- the failed singer is her vocal coach, the cabbie drives Kiki around and so on. Kiki soon becomes a star, but everyone is so afraid of upsetting their meal ticket that Kiki becomes a spoiled brat. Well, not quite. as the people behind me said, Kiki behaves like a brat but she never becomes annoying. We're always aware she's just doing what any kid might do if indulged and that Kiki really just wants to be treated like the little girl she is.

The first act is silly fun, with strong numbers like the opener "You Gotta Listen" and "Love Love Love" (Rosen's high point) good counterpoints to Kiki's trilling. After establishing this nutty, screwball of a premise, they end the act with the arrival of the father back from America -- a strong-voiced Louis Hobson. All well and good...until the show abandons its wacky heart and decides to get serious. Suddenly, Kiki is being tarted up on stage Lolita-fashion, the grandmother with a stroke (always an awkward presence during the first act) becomes the target of Kiki's taunts and brutal sacrifices must be made to rescue the child. Huh? When did this silly and unassuming musical comedy decide high drama was the way to go? It's a fatal misstep -- presumably dictated by the novel *Sing, Brat, Sing* by Rene Fulop-Miller that it's based on.

The creative team should strongly rethink the entire second half of the show and be guided by the delightfully daffy performance of Colella, which should set the tone for the entire musical. Lonny Price is the main driving force behind this. He co-directed and co-wrote the books and lyrics. The result is an absolutely original and winning character saddled with heavy tragedy. No. Let Kiki be Kiki!

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GREENWOOD *

SIGNATURE THEATRE

You know how someone else's high school reunion is a lot more fun for them than it could ever be for you? That's the overriding feeling of *Greenwood*, a show about a musical theater summer camp and the kids who had a really, really great time there and can't shake the feeling as adults that it was the highlight of their lives. Apparently, that feeling is right since they are stuck in unhappy marriages, moribund careers and/or simply alone because they've never gotten over that guy/that girl.

The entire cast is game but it's the kids who come off best. They're at summer camp and having fun and their dialogue isn't nearly as burdened with earnest psycho-babble as the adults. Young Alex (a handsome [Andrew Redlawsk](#)) and Young Zoe (Alicia Morton) make the most of the show's best song, "I Like You." As an adult, Alex will be a failed actor, stymied by his early success at summer camp and the fact that his one true love Zoe left camp without saying goodbye. [Bryan Welnicki](#) also does his best with the awkward vocal lines and even more awkward lyrics of the would-be inspirational tune "Wings Of Fire." Somehow, Welnicki almost gives the song substance; it helps to treat it with the unquestioning passion that a teenager who loves musical theater might. He also brings an unhappy edge to Daniel that foreshadows one of the show's more melodramatic subplots.

"Facebook Fugue" and "Sheila's Visit" both start promisingly but soon devolve into more banal territory. That's about it, I fear. The adult storyline -- 25 years later, they reunite to stage a revival of their triumphant final summer show -- overwhelms the kids, who soon fall into the background. With lines like "we're not reviving a show, we're reviving ourselves" and lyrics like "The me that I was plus the me that I am equals the me that I want to be" or "I'd rather have myself than have it all" are just too much to overcome.

Most of the songs by Tor Hyams and Adam LeBow (they wrote the book, music & lyrics) shoehorn in so much self-help insights that a melody can't stand a chance either, not even with the likes of Andrea McArdle as the Adult Sheila belting them out. It's a sign of how poorly constructed *Greenwood* is that you spend most of the first act trying to figure out which adult characters are the grown-up versions of which younger ones, something that can presumably be worked out with some good staging by director and choreographer Paul Stancato. But then, there's a lot to work on.

GOTTA GETA GIRL -- ** 1/2 for staged reading MCGINN CAZALE THEATRE

It doesn't feel right to give a rating to this staged reading of a new musical comedy. it's a tap-dance crazy show and in a dance-oriented musical, much of the story should be pushed forward by the dancing. Happily, we got to see stars Michael LaMasa and Sam Underwood genially tap and charm their way through the opening number "Tops In Taps." But after that, the dancing was limited to our imagination.

It's worth imagining since the two leads are handsome and charismatic and are joined by a very funny Stephanie Torns as the gal needed to sex up their act. She drives a wedge between these two best friends with her hunger for stardom. Check out this recording of the title track where Gene (Underwood) convinces Don they need some gams in their fading tap dance act to make it big.



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The show breezes along nicely, with the old-fashioned aura nicely counterbalanced by the fact that Don is clearly in love with Gene, who is not so clearly in love with Debbie (he sleeps with her just to prove he's a "man") but sure misses his pal when they separate.

The story moves briskly from the circuit to Hollywood to ultimately World War II and some of the songs are very strong, including "When I'm Dancing With You," Torns' audition for the boys tune "Boing (I'm In Love)" and "She Do." It gets truly wacky when Don decides to dress as Donna DeMarko to uncover the scheming Debbie and win back his best pal. And that's where I lost the ability to see how the show would come across.

A little gay humor goes a long way, so Don's unrequited love for Gene should only be used for one or two laughs early on, not so many more that they pull us out of the era. Plus, the funniest number in the show combines lyrics from the two leads' solos into one number to raunchy effect. It would be a shame to lose it but it too yanks you out of the period mood they've so effectively created. I know Don as Donna dances Debbie right off the stage at one key moment, so maybe that will show us everything we need to see about why Gene falls in love with her/him. But it would be nicer to see Donna more actively helping Gene. Plus, Gene's transformation from clueless to loving ("I'm Just A Guy") isn't quite there. Maybe it should be more obvious to us that Gene is gay but just doesn't know it yet. That would also give Don a chance to be smarter and wiser and more patient, rather than just hapless and pushed around. Finally, Debbie's meanest move is to convince Don to leave the act so Gene can have a shot at Hollywood stardom. But heck, Don might have done that on his own if he'd felt he was holding Gene back. So the enjoyably hissable Debbie needs even more villainy to let us hate her.

Keeping all that in mind, the book and lyrics by Peter Charles Morris and the music by David Caldwell already can boast a solid accomplishment in creating a breezy world, three distinctive characters and a clutch of good songs.

MADAME X **

47TH STREET THEATRE

If only it were more fun. Gerard Alessandrini is rightly famous for his *Forbidden Broadway* revue. Here he tackles a new musical, co-writing the book, music and lyrics with Robert Hetzel. They joke that it's based on the 1905 play by Alexandre Bisson "and every movie and musical made between 1946 and 1966." So here come the laughs and the over the top melodrama...but not quite enough of either.

The story is the usual affair: Bunny Bixby (Donna English) is a beauty queen contestant who catches the eye of rising politician Cliff Henderson (Michael West). He whisks her into his world of privilege and power where she is kept under the watchful eye of his scheming mother (an excellent Janet Dickinson) who thinks she knows a gold digger when she sees one. Cliff is always away on business, Donna is wooed strenuously by Roberto Romanelli (a very good James Donegan on the performance I caught). He is killed; she is implicated and the mother-in-law forces her to flee the country where she becomes Madame X, estranged from her husband and lovable son, wandering the world to sink into booze and despair and the ultimate indignity of nightclub chanteuse.

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It's more fun to describe, unfortunately, than to watch. Time and again, entire scenes exist just to move the plot forward, neither funny or melodramatic enough to do anything but kill time. The problem pops up early when tunes like "Christmas 1962" prove good pastiches but nothing more. *Madame X* simply takes too long to get to where it's going and the journey is not fun enough to make getting there worthwhile.

But they've assembled an excellent cast that often doubles or triples their parts to good effect. Up and down the line, they're as good as you could ask from English right down to the handsome chorus boys Mike Longo and Sean Bell who sing, dance and deliver comic characters in sharp strokes. All the ingredients were there; this time, for whatever reason, Alessandrini just didn't quite whip it up right. Perhaps doing an original show (as he's done before) made him feel he should play it a little too straight? P.S. Great poster

TUT * 1/2

THEATRE AT ST. CLEMENT'S

This is a dance-oriented musical, more of a chamber piece or opera than a showtune happy affair. That naturally brings to mind the Philip Glass opera about Tutankhamun's father, *Ahkenaten*. That opera was written for a counter-tenor whereas Tut also features a lead performer (the committed Curtis Wiley) with a distinctive voice. The story is filled with drama, though little tension is ever created on stage.

Sean McLaughlin is the archeologist/explorer Howard Carter, desperate to discover the lost tomb of King Tut in his final expedition to Egypt. Centuries earlier, Tut wants to bring glory to Egypt, while fighting off vicious advisers and honoring the memory of his father and the man's devotion to the one true Sun God. Treachery, deception, betrayal, despair -- all are indicated though the show is too formal to let them come to life.

The music, lyrics and book are by Marcus Hummon while the direction and significant choreography that dominates the presentation are by Abdel R. Salaam. Some moments gain a heightened theatricality thanks to the dancing, such as the battle scenes. But more often the classical air keeps the show from drawing blood. Carter's repeated signature number about seeking "Wonderful Things" is also too flat and banal an image to take fire once, much less get repeated throughout.

it must have been extremely challenging to mount such a formalized, dance-heavy piece with oratorio stylings under the time and money constraints of this festival. If some of the dancing seems perfunctory or merely decorative rather than emotionally compelling, that surely is one reason. Much can be admired. Kris Coleman delivers Ahkenaten's big moment "Trial and Death of Ahkanaten" with passion. N'Kenge also holds your attention on her two big numbers, especially a duet with Tut on "I Will Live Forever." And Wiley pours his heart into this role.

Clever use of pre-recorded backing vocals let the already large cast feel grand opera in scope. Unfortunately, the show at this stage never comes truly alive, telling rather than showing the dangerous journey that Tut made as a ruler of his country who died while still a teenager.

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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 of staged reading
Greenwood *
Jack Perry Is Alive (And Dating) * 1/2
Kiki Baby ** 1/2
Kissless * 1/2
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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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