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NYMF Roundup #!: Turning 40 and Flaming Desserts

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This is the first in a series of roundups covering shows appearing as part of the [New York Musical Theatre Festival](#), or [NYMF](#). Every year I attend as many shows as I can and invariably see one or two shows that will rank among the best of the year and discover some new talented performers and behind the scenes artists I'll

want to keep an eye on in future productions. Go to the [NYMF](#) website for more info on inexpensive tickets.

PICTURE INCOMPLETE ** out of ****

FLAMBE DREAMS ** out of ****

PICTURE INCOMPLETE ** out of ****

THE 45TH STREET THEATRE

The engaging performer Trent Armand Kendall tells the story of his life in this one man musical, but unfortunately the picture remains incomplete. We get vague, aspirational songs and mild stories of excess (over-drinking, over-eating, over-sleeping) but nothing vivid or remarkable enough to raise eyebrows on a daytime talk show. A story about almost setting your apartment on fire because you passed out while cooking may be an amusing anecdote among friends but it's thin stuff in a world where Richard Pryor ran down the street with his hair on fire after freebasing. Before the show has even really begun, it takes a detour into social consciousness for a song about homelessness. Admirable, but when we're still wondering who Trent is and why he's onstage telling us his story, it's also distracting and out of place.

Throughout the music and lyrics by longtime collaborator Michael Polese (with book and additional lyrics by Kendall) tend towards the nebulous. We get very broad outlines of his life and desires to become a star, a brief hint towards a road not taken (parenting) followed soon by coming out. But after watching the entire show, here are just some of the things we don't know (without peeking at his bio): what kind of performer is Kendall trying to be? We know he performed in front of the Queen of England but how did that happen? We know for one brief happy year he was making six figures. But doing what? Was he a recording artist a la Luther Vandross? A member of a group? A backup singer? A theatrical performer in shows? (That apparently, is the case.) We know he's gay but whether he's single and unlucky in love or happily partnered remains another mystery. Indeed, the picture is very incomplete.

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What we do know is that Kendall can sing and hold a stage. The show really comes to life in the all too brief moments when he plays other characters. A straight-talking Latina neighbor who calls everyone "gurl" is such a clear high point of the show that she's brought back for the finale. Quick sketches of his grandfather and others also score strongly. If Kendall had created a show where he brought to life the people of his apartment building, peopling it with a string of characters, it might well have proven far more illuminating than his personal struggles with weight loss and the like. As that neighbor, he's hilarious. Kendall also shines when bantering with the audience in a stand-up style. Freed from baring his soul, he's just plain funny and compelling and suddenly he's a person we actually *want* to learn more about.

One of the few songs that delivers is "Walk-in Closet." It's just a ditty really but as Kendall dives into it he says it's pretty catchy, isn't it? Yes, it is. It's one of the few songs that stops the introspection long enough to create a strong chorus and melody. There's a lesson in that. I look forward to seeing Kendall again in a show where he puts his talents to use bringing other people to life; that's when we get to know him best.

FLAMBE DREAMS ** out of ****
THE 45TH STREET THEATRE

Well, you have to give it points for originality. *Flambe Dreams* is a silly -- but not quite silly enough -- musical about a young man with serious OCD issues who longs to become a maitre d like his late father, who perished in a freak flaming bananas foster fire. His journey takes him from a small town in Middle America to New York City and the famed *Le Cirque* restaurant with stops along the way for friends, food and quite a few pills of Prozac.

Our hero's name is Joe and he's played by **Jarrod Spector**, who has played Frankie Valli on Broadway in *Jersey Boys*, among many other credits. He probably loved playing someone so innocent and gullible after the high drama of that show and is unafraid to make Joe a naif who knows a lot about flaming desserts but very little about anything else, including girls or even who Jay-Z is. Despite a clinging mother and a serious regiment of pill popping, Joe takes the plunge to follow his dream, heads to Manhattan, befriends the pharmacist at a Duane Reade (where he is probably their best customer) and works his way up from a tea shop to a noodle shop to his lifelong dream of being an honest to goodness maitre d.

The main problem is that Joe is a little too much of a naif. He's a rather sexless character (though Spector himself is very appealing indeed). A romance might be blossoming with that pharmacist Gloria (Jillian Louis) but only on her part. Gloria quite fancies Joe but when she disappears he only seems upset because it throws into disarray his daily routine. When Joe storms out of the Duane Reade in fear and anger, it's not thwarted romance you think about, it's a guy who needs some serious therapy.

The only genuine heat is generated when Joe goes online and meets a girl who has a thing for maitre d's (God bless the internet; it has someone for everyone). Their online musings about a potential date are the emotional high point of the show and isn't that telling? Throughout Joe's mother (Catherine Cox) keeps in touch, worried about her son, pushing him to take his pills and ultimately and unsurprisingly hopping on a plane to check up on him before his dreams -- or perhaps even Joe -- go up in flames.

As I mentioned, the main problem with this musical comedy is that the romance at the heart of it never even begins. But there are others, mainly a confusion about the show's message. It says that Joe's mother



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-- a psychiatrist who should know better than to prescribe pills for a relative, much less her son -- is overprotective, afraid to let him grow up and filling him up with unnecessary medication. Joe keeps referring to Gloria as being just as soothing as medicine, as if the love of a true woman was what he truly needs, not Prozac. But we also see time and again and especially at the fiery climax that Joe is indeed at the very least OCD and surely in need of some pills or serious therapy of some sort. And yet at the end it's possible he's off his pills for good. I think. Anyone watching Joe when he tries to go off his regimen can't help thinking *that's* not a good idea.

As the show progresses but the romance doesn't, the weight of change falls on Joe's mother and her realization that she's smothering her son. Cox acts her way through her songs but unfortunately she carries the bulk of the dramatic moments and her modest voice isn't quite up to the task. Similarly, Louis was perhaps cast for her faux operatic turn as Julie Andrews in a dream sequence (her over-enunciation is a comic high point in the show) more than her regular singing voice, which strains at times. Through no fault of her own, their would-be romance which has no chance to grow remains sparkless. J. Elaine Marcos has a lot more fun in multiple roles, including a rote streetwalker in the Rosie Perez vein she somehow brings a little to life (those short shorts don't hurt) and that online date with an eye for tuxes. Kevin B. McGlynn also has fun in multiple roles, especially the snooty Emile, though no one could turn the cliched hippie River or the Japanese noodle chef Yashinoya into anything more than quickly forgotten stereotypes. [Spector](#) holds the whole show together with his stage presence and willingness to commit wholly to this enterprise, despite their neutered take on Joe.

Director West Hylar keeps the show moving and given its many parts and the overall silliness of it, the more it moves the better. You don't want to think too much about this one. Most of the songs by creators Matthew Hardy and Randy Klein have an amusing line or two, with "Chatroom" and "Perfection" obvious highlights. But there are too many reprises of Joe's signature tune and his mom's plaintive claim she's just trying to help children. The intermission arrives far too late (better to tighten up the show and have none at all). On the bright side, if they served bananas foster in the lobby during the intermission or after the show, they'd make a killing.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare In The Park w Lily Rabe) ****

Chimichangas And Zolof *

*Closer Than Ever****

Cock ** 1/2

Harvey with Jim Parsons *

My Children! My Africa! ***

*Once On This Island****

Potted Potter *

Storefront Church ** 1/2

*Title And Deed****

Picture Incomplete (NYMF) **

Flambe Dreams (NYMF) **

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of [Showbiz Sandbox](#), a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called [Popsurfing](#) and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

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

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