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NYMF 2012 Roundup #4: Cool Cats and Chlorine in New Musicals

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This is the fourth in a series of roundups covering shows appearing in the [New York Musical Theatre Festival](#), or [NYMF](#). Every year I attend as many shows as I can and invariably see one or two that will rank among the best of the year, as well as discovering 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.

[HOW DEEP IS THE OCEAN?](#) ** 1/2 out of ****

[CENTRAL AVENUE BREAKDOWN](#) ***

[HOW DEEP IS THE OCEAN?](#) ** 1/2 out of ****

[THE THEATRE AT ST. CLEMENT'S](#)

Pianist and singer [Peter Cincotti](#) has a new album out but he hasn't saved all the best melodies for *Metropolis*. Happily, this collaboration with his sister Pia (she wrote the book) proves Cincotti also has a gift for theatrical numbers that move the story along, reveal character and have memorable melodies. With some work to focus and tighten the silly but endearing book, this could become an offbeat charmer.

The story is goofy in the extreme. Rob (a winning Eric Leviton) is a genius when it comes to cleaning and chlorinating pools. He doesn't make a lot of money but boy does he love his job. So when the pollution-damaged waters of the Jersey Shore threaten the livelihood of his friends at Monmouth Beach, it's no surprise that Rob comes up with a winning formula to chlorinate the ocean and save the day.

The only problem? His one-time pal and secret arch enemy Andy (Aaron Ramey) who throws a spanner in the works, hoping to win acclaim for himself and woo away Rob's wife Jackie (Michelle Federer). That may not be so hard -- in one of the show's best numbers, she complains that Rob's fixation on pools leaves her feeling "Second Best."

This sounds too dumb for words, until people start singing. Musicals can make even oddball ideas like this one...well, sing. The jaunty opener sets the mood quickly, Rob's "What More Do I Need" is catchy in a Billy Joel manner (Cincotti isn't afraid of a catchy melody like so many theater composers), "If She Were Mine" deftly lets us know Andy's simmering resentment and before you know it you're caught up in

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the tale. Other highlights include "With That Kind Of Money," "Time For Andy," and "Handyman From Heaven." That's a lot of highlights for any show.

Along with those strong melodies, the strength of this show is the excellent cast. Leviton does a great job with the regular Joe Rob and Federer is believable as his no-nonsense wife. She gets frustrated at his occasional dimness but gosh she loves the lug. That's not so easy to get across, but Federer does it easily. Best of all is Ramey as the scheming Andy. His excellent voice and Tool Time persona make him perfect for the frustrated friend of Rob. Ramey wisely never overplays the villainy, which roots the whole silly venture in a realistic vein. All the supporting players are fun in their various roles, from Amanda Bruton as a pal of Jackie to Joseph Ryan Harrington as the Kid to [Anthony Festa](#), who makes you wish the beach were always open for swimming.

Edward Pierce does a good job with the scenic design, though the pool represented by a rod with hanging down algae is a minor disappointment. (Surely something more imaginative could be created.) Choreographer Wendy Seyb keeps her not so limber cast moving nicely and directors Jeremy Dobrish and Gina Rattan oversee it all with keep-it-moving economy.

Now the areas that need work. Rob sings about 17 odes to the joys of chlorine when really we only needed one. Ditto the flashbacks to childhood where Rob is constantly playing with chlorine; he's constantly being yelled at and told there's not future in chlorine. We get it; he's crazy about pool cleaning.

The requiems for a whale which are interspersed are meant to underline the pollution in the ocean I guess, but they feel out of place and slow the action down.

A key flashback is botched: we see Rob and Andy back when they were partners in the pool cleaning business. About the only essential idea we've learned about Rob is that he's a sweetheart and loves cleaning pools. But in the flashback suddenly he's lazy on the job (and not because he's caught up in the raptures of chlorine) and even seems to take credit when Andy deserves it as well. He's not much of a team player and we can understand why Andy resents him. But that's surely not the point. Far better if we saw Andy shirking his duties and taking advantage of Rob even back then without Rob actually knowing it. Seeing Rob still get the girl and credit for his skills would be the festering sore for Andy, not a genuine resentment of a slob who didn't do his fair share of the work. That just throws the show out of whack.

Even worse is the flashback that shows Rob responsible for the death of his mother presumably because he over-chlorinated the pool. I kept waiting for another flashback where we'd find out the youthful Andy was actually responsible (unintentionally, I imagined). But no, Rob killed his mom? Huh? This feels wildly out of place in the show. That might create a problem for the song where the ghost of Rob's mom comes back in the form of a black woman to sing him a clue to his conundrum over how to properly chlorinate the ocean. But not really -- just have his wife prepare him some food so Rob can complain his late mother made it better. "Well, let her make it for you then" she can complain loudly. This could add to their friction and poof, you've got a dream sequence ready to go. I'd also add an earlier hint of Rob's affection for a certain sitcom to make a late show surprise (quite a fun one) not seem so far out of left field. If a celeb's not available down the road, let the actress playing his mom play him too.

So straightening out the back story, focusing the tension between Rob and Andy, cutting the grisly fact of Rob's matricide, removing the whale funeral music, and letting just one or two references to chlorine stand in for the hundreds already filling the show and you've got yourself a breezy silly show with great roles for non-traditional leads (ie. guys who ain't so young or pretty anymore). Here's hoping that the Cincottis have caught the musical theater bug.

[CENTRAL AVENUE BREAKDOWN *** SIGNATURE THEATRE](#)

This is the return of [Central Avenue Breakdown](#), which I first saw at NYMF in 2011. [Here's my original review](#).

The story remains the same: a family moves to Los Angeles with the dream of seeing dad William make it big on the jazz scene. In a painful scene that's more subtle and effective this time around, we realize he's just outclassed. That doesn't stop the dream however. William starts teaching music to locals and passes on his passion to his sons, the dutiful Bill and the fiery and more talented Jim. Bill is soon working steadily as a sideman in swing bands (good enough to get called up to the big time and join Duke Ellington) while Jim is drawn to bebop. He doesn't want people to dance to his music, he wants them to sit and listen. And when they don't (at first) it drives him to despair. Toss in a beautiful Hollywood movie star who can swing a tune like Anita O'Day for a love triangle and the racial prejudice of LA cops in that era for some simmering violence and you've got yourself a show.

This updated version directed and choreographed again by Christopher Windom is more focused and successful. They've tossed out an unnecessary framing device and made clearer the romance between the movie star Jane and Bill, making her affair with Jim all the more painful. I wish Rebecca LaChance had been given more motivation for that betrayal that she and Jim indulge in. But overall, her character and performance are stronger, with LaChance nailing the tricky changes on her swinging jazz number in act one with more confidence this time around. (She was always aces with her act two number "Unnatural

 **Gary Hart**
Welcome to the American Republic, Mr. Eastwood

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Attraction.") Albert Christmas and Stacey Sargeant are world weary but unbowed as the parents while Juson Williams is having a blast and serves as the master of ceremony as the exuberant Thaddeus Clemons III, the owner of LA's coolest jazz club.

The two brothers are very charismatic as portrayed by Joshua Boone as Bill and Rod Lawrence as Jim. It's clearer now in this production that Bill has talent and confidence of his own, even though jim is the genius. That makes their brotherly back and forth more effective. Lawrence is also subtler with the descent into addiction. These are two very tricky, rewarding parts with the actors called on to belt out some numbers and swing through pages of dialogue at other points in some very ambitious tunes by Kevin Ray. (The book is by Ray & Andrea Lepcio, with additional story by Suellen Vance. Lepcio's contributions have sharpened things up nicely.) Both actors are stronger in the dramatic scenes than some of the exceptionally difficult tunes they have to navigate, but both also shine at certain points.

[Central Avenue Breakdown](#) still feels a little too schematic in its good brother/brother gone astray tale with heroin addiction and an upbeat finale colliding rather abruptly at the end. But with the strong cast, swinging band and some terrific tunes, it convincingly gives a glimpse into the jazz world of LA back in the day. The work they've put into it has paid off with a more satisfying evening of theater. It may not be ready to jump to Broadway, but at times it does jump and jive and that's an accomplishment indeed.

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) **

Rio (NYMF) **

The Two Month Rule (NYMF) *

Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2

Stealing Time (NYMF) **

Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2

Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ***

Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2

How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2

[Central Avenue Breakdown](#) (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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