

September 1, 2012

HUFF POST NEW YORK

Edition: U.S. ▾



FRONT PAGE POLITICS BUSINESS ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA STYLE FOOD TECH ARTS GAY VOICES LIVE | ALL SECTIONS

New York · Around Town Restaurants Real Estate NY Impact Best of New York NYPD Scandals Parties MTA WTC



Featuring fresh takes and real-time analysis from HuffPost's signature lineup of contributors

HOT ON THE BLOG

Dr. Peggy Drexler
Rep. Dennis Kucinich

Gary Hart
Kevin Maurer

HuffPost Social Reading



Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

GET UPDATES FROM MICHAEL GILTZ

Like 107

NYMF 2012 Roundup #6: Jews, HIV, Swing States and the Bible

Posted: 07/29/2012 1:48 pm

React > Amazing Inspiring Funny Scary Hot Crazy Important Weird

Read more > New York News

SHARE THIS STORY

Submit this story

This is the sixth and final entry 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 usually see one or two that will rank among the best of the year, as well as always 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.

A LETTER TO HARVEY MILK ** 1/2 out of ****

SWING STATE * 1/2 out of ****

STAND TALL: A ROCK MUSICAL * 1/2 out of ****

A LETTER TO HARVEY MILK ** 1/2 out of ****

SIGNATURE THEATRE

This is a sweet, well-acted and sung show about a nice old widowed butcher in San Francisco who starts taking a writing class from a nice young lesbian. She likes speaking Yiddish, he likes chatting with her. Dredging up painful stories from the past? Not so much. But the nice young teacher cajoles and kvetches and soon the stories are pouring out.

Unfortunately, the book -- based on the short story by Leslea Newman -- is weighted down with not one but two major tragedies. The butcher Harry is haunted by dreams about the assassination of politician Harvey Milk (a regular in his store) AND memories of the Holocaust. He's also haunted -- but in a more comforting manner -- by his late wife Frannie, who is always ready with a quip or a word of comfort.

Director David Schechter sets a good tone with his large and capable task. Michael Bartoli does strong work in multiple roles, especially the pushy, friendly Harvey Milk. Cheryl Stern is forced into being a joke machine at first as the ghost of Frannie, but when the show turns more serious she's allowed to bring a little more nuance to her role, although she'll still get laughs by running across the stage with her hands thrown up in disgust or singing "What A Shonda."

But the heart of the show is the warm friendship that develops between Barbara the teacher and Harry the butcher. Leslie Kritzer is very good as Barbara and has a powerhouse voice to match. Even better is Jeff Keller as Harry. He holds the stage easily with his avuncular manner and charming voice, ably

FOLLOW US

MOST POPULAR ON HUFFPOST 1 of 2

Mitt Romney To Flood Victim: 'Go Home And Call 211'
Like 7k

Paul Ryan Admits Marathon Lie
Like 6k

Former 'SNL' Star Makes Shocking Comments About Rape And Gay Friends
Like 1k

What's Up With Those Circular Marks On Curiosity?
Like 33

Celebs React To Eastwood's Wild Speech
Like 220

WATCH: Rachel Maddow At A Loss For Words After Clint Eastwood's RNC Speech
Like 3k

Eastwood Misfires
Like 4k

Sarah Palin May Be Done At Fox News: Report
Like 2k

Teen Heading To Sweet 16 Party, Pops His Head Out Window, Dies
Recommend 300

DON'T MISS HUFFPOST BLOGGERS 1 of 5

Dr. Peggy Drexler
Why It's Important To Let Your Child Make Mistakes

guiding us through Harry's dreams, interactions with the ghost of his wife, flashbacks to the war or chats with Harvey and present day encounters with Barbara. The book by Jerry James is actually quite complicated in its structure but Keller keeps us rooted in the moment.

The songs by Laura L. Kramer (music) and Ellen M. Schwartz (lyrics) range from silly to schmaltzy but for quite a while they move the story along easily, though I doubt sentiments like the one suggesting that if we all held hands then no one could hold a gun and other aphorisms.

But the central problem is the looming presence of the Holocaust, which feels too weighty a matter for such a low-key musical like this. It's there from the beginning since we immediately see a person in Holocaust death camp garb present in Harry's dreams that open the show. (That dream which centers on the shooting of Milk is also repeated far too often. We're hardly likely to forget the gunning down of a man in a one act musical, so there's no need to keep showing it. The troubled look in Keller's eyes would be plenty.)

It's there to explain why Harry drives a wedge between himself and Barbara by angrily insisting she not announce to the world that she's a lesbian. Finally, at the climax, he tells her one more story, a story from the death camps that will explain his attitude. However moving, what's to explain? He's an old man in 1986 who can be very friendly and even fatherly to a lesbian but flinches when she brashly announces it to a waiter in a restaurant. If his age isn't explanation enough, surely the fact that he treated Harvey Milk like a son and then saw Milk brutally killed for being openly gay would be explanation enough?

The climax may be over-burdened but that shouldn't obscure the solid work all around, including the musical direction, orchestrations and arrangements by Ned Paul Ginsburg which bring out the best in the small ensemble and the score by Kramer. When the show stays in the low-key vein that suits it, the songs often soar and any show would be glad to have two leads as solid and effective as Keller and Krttzer. Keller and Kritzer -- it sounds like an old vaudeville act and indeed at its best *A Letter To Harvey Milk* allows these two to play off each other with practiced ease.

SWING STATE * 1/2 out of **** **45TH STREET THEATRE**

Here's a rather confused two-hander that benefits greatly from the personable leads who perform it. Bonnie (Morgan Weed) is a hardcore Christian and public school teacher who can barely get through a day minding her little students (pre-school or kindergarten or maybe first grade at most; I'm not sure which) without blurting out her love for Jesus. That's put her on suspension and created a tremendous amount of stress.


Unfortunately, her favorite chiropractor has left town and the business has been bought by a gay man named Neil (Jed Resnick), who has a new, gentler approach to pain but also asks a lot of nosy questions (like when was her last period). Bonnie needs to learn to relax (and maybe save her career). Neil has come back to this small town where he spent summers with his grandparents, hoping to make peace with himself after a childhood of bullying. (When boys steal his pants and underwear, Neil comes home in tears only to have his grandfather ignore him in disgust. Sissy!) Lessons, obviously, will be learned.

The book and lyrics are by Dana Yeaton and the music by Andy Mitton. Unfortunately, the tone of the show is never quite established. Far and away the best song is the wickedly funny tune Bonnie sings when she's reading a picture book to her students about the evils of abortion. But overall, the tone is more gentle and timid. We're supposed to feel equal empathy for both characters as they learn to appreciate and respect each other.

But the hard-right Christian is hard to like as shown here. Bonnie is practically unhinged and so unhappy she's sad and along. Not only has she endangered her job by blurting out Jesus five times a day to her students, she's also estranged herself from her fellow Christians by trying to lead protests against the school that backfired greatly. About the worst that one can say about Neil is that he isn't too fond of people who denigrate his very existence and yet still tries to be professional.

Bonnie drives away even more friends (and blindsides Neil) when she tries to make him a member of her Bible group, leading Neil to angrily denounce her and the rest as hypocrites and throw down a Bible in disgust. She later chides him for not recognizing that many in the group were ready to accept him, ignoring the fact that given her beliefs it was likely they'd accept him only if he was ready to renounce being actively gay.

This is all to add too much weight and thought to a story that just wants to let these two people get to know each other. But it would be more interesting if Bonnie weren't such a cartoon and Neil so tepid. Weed and Resnick have some good fun during their chiropractic sessions but a show in which Neil not only heals Bonnie with his touch but gets her period flowing again so she can be a complete woman is asking a lot. Plus, with a swing set ensconced front and center and the title of the show *Swing State*, they really should work on a song about childhood and innocence surrounding swings so that the main prop on the stage isn't just used at the last moment for a final image but serves a more prominent part in the show's imagination.

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

TOP VIDEO PICKS 1 of 9

Georgina Bloomberg Partners With Ariat

 **Aron Sentenced to 40 Years**

 **Isabella and Jayden Top NYC Baby Names**

MOST DISCUSSED RIGHT NOW 1 of 2

 **'We Should Pray For The AP'**

 **19,250 PHOTO: Islamophobic Billboard Causes Outrage**

HOT ON FACEBOOK 1 of 3

 **Father's Will Dictates That Gay Son Marry Woman For Inheritance**

 **NYPD Bullets Wounded All Nine In Empire State Building Shooting**

 HOT ON TWITTER 1 of 2

 **aol**
In honor of Labor Day, here are some of TV's hardest workers
<http://t.co/XTjvtfGy> via @HuffPostTV **Retweet**

 **aol**
Staying in this Labor Day Weekend? Here's what to watch on TV <http://t.co/Ygqtb4U6> via @HuffPostTV **Retweet**

HUFFPOST'S BIG NEWS PAGES

 **Movies**  **Most Popular**  **Turtles**

STAND TALL: A ROCK MUSICAL * 1/2 out of ****

45TH STREET THEATRE

This is a biblical tale about David and Goliath set to rock music a la *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. It starts with the solid song "Find Us A King" and ends with another one, the title tune "Stand Tall," both rousingly performed by a talented cast. In between we have a very weak book and a few decent tunes that can't wipe out the tired jokes and plodding action that constitutes the show.

Problem number one is that the show is purportedly based on the tale of David versus Goliath, but in fact ignores even the broad outlines of that story. Here, David is a rock star who plays for the cruel king and longs for his daughter. Goliath was a former member of the band but is kicked out because he never showed up for practice and now resents David. When the prophecy spreads that David will be the next king, said king wants to kill him but then decides if David marries his daughter than the kid will have to support him anyway and money is all he wants so problem solved. Meanwhile, Goliath, rather than being part of the army defending the king, just wants to settle his own grudge.

Why use the name of David and Goliath if you're going to ignore even the underpinning motivations of that story? Presumably it was because they decided to recast David and Goliath as a story of bullying. Problem number two? There's no real bullying. Goliath is angry that David "stole" his rock band and wants revenge. But he doesn't spend the show taunting and bullying David. They barely interact until they have one fight and then resolve their differences with a guitar solo showdown. And just in case we think Goliath is just a jerk, we're quickly shown that he's physically and psychologically abused by his father. At the final, that's resolved in a heartbeat in the best tradition of after-school specials and David and Goliath might even become friends again. It's that kind of show.

The dreadful book -- filled with dull repetitions of the plot, bad jokes and the ineffective device of a saucy angel disguised as a black sheep playing the narrator -- needs to be entirely rewritten. It's a pity because when they put their minds to it, Lee Wyatt-Buchan and Sandy & Aldie Chalmers can deliver some very strong tunes. Along with the opening and closing numbers, they score with Goliath's "Reasonable Man" and the black sheep's predictably soulful big number "Twelve Baa Blues." (The inspirational tune "Stronger Than This" is too self-consciously intended to inspire.)

They waste those few good songs and a solid cast. Jef Canter has as much fun as possible in multiple roles as King Saul and others. Trista Dollison is saddled with tired cliches in her part but comes out of it with her dignity intact and makes you almost believe her songs are good. Jill Shackner is notably flat in the dialogue scenes, though anyone would have a hard time with the book and is not the strongest singer. But the two leads are talented. Gerard Canonico does his best as the petulant Goliath and Bryan Welnicki has the looks and voice of a burgeoning pop star indeed.

It would take a miracle to turn *Stand Tall* into a good musical. But I have faith that with diligence and hard work that the team that delivered the handful of strong tunes sprinkled throughout is capable of much better.

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) ***

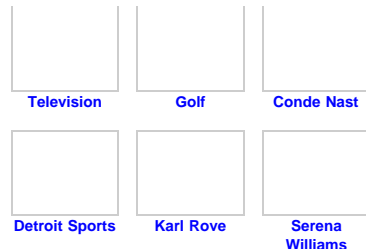
Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2

Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2

Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2

Living With Henry (NYMF) *

A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2



[MORE BIG NEWS PAGES »](#)

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.

Follow Michael Giltz on Twitter: www.twitter.com/michaelgiltz

FOLLOW NEW YORK

Like 24k

GET ALERTS

[More in New York...](#)

Fatima Jones Dead
In Shooting Near
Prospect...

New York Zoning
Law On Adult
Clubs...

Bloomberg Dines At
Alobar, Long Island
City...

Peter King: 'We
Should Pray For
The...

Comments 1 Pending Comments 0 [View FAQ](#)

HuffPost Social News

To reply to a Comment: Click "Reply" at the bottom of the comment; after being approved your comment will appear directly underneath the comment you replied to.

[Preview Comment](#) [Post Comment](#)

Share your Comment:

Post to Facebook.	Post to Blogger.	Post to Twitter.
Post to WordPress.	Post to TypePad.	Post to Tumblr.

View All

Recency | Popularity

William Rohan
34 Fans

12:06 AM on 07/30/2012

Education is the cure to AIDS America Is Dying Slowly

[Permalink](#) | [Share it](#)

[Advertise](#) | [Make HuffPost your Home Page](#) | [RSS](#) | [Careers](#) | [FAQ](#)

[User Agreement](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Comment Policy](#) | [About Us](#) | [About Our Ads](#) | [Contact Us](#)

Copyright © 2012 TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. | "The Huffington Post" is a registered trademark of TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. All rights reserved.

Part of **HuffPost Local**