
Theater: NYMF #2: Stardom, Spirits and Suicide in Three New Musicals

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The **New York Musical Theatre Festival** (or **NYMF**) is one of the highlights of the summer in New York City, an oasis of scrappy little shows that have come from other parts of the country or are making their world premiere here. All of them dream of Broadway or at least an open-ended production and the worst case scenario is that you can usually spot some talented actor you'll want to keep an eye out for in years to come. Here's a rundown of three more musicals, with another six on my calendar this week.

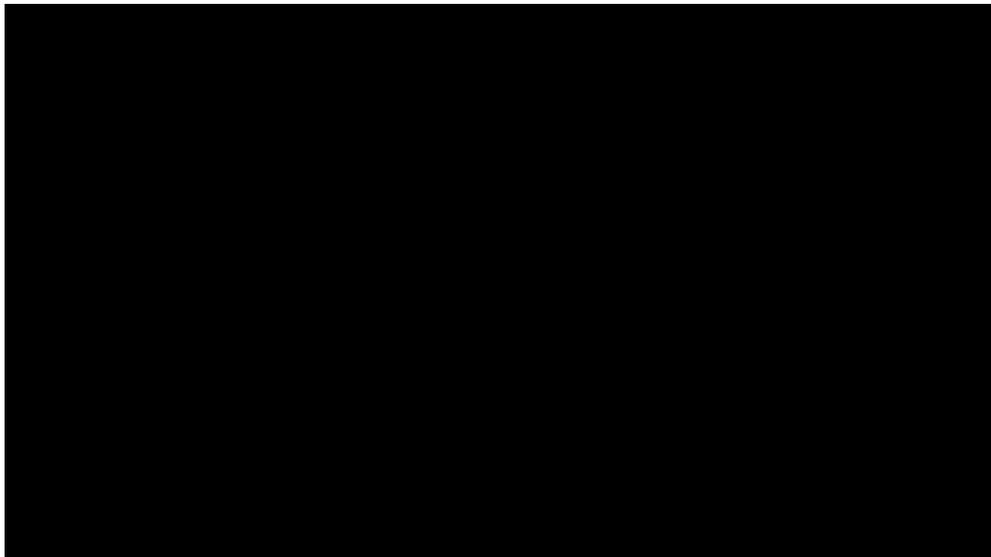
LIFE COULD BE A DREAM ** out of ****
MOTHER DIVINE ** out of ****
JULIAN PO ** 1/2 out of ****

LIFE COULD BE A DREAM ** out of ****
NYMF AT SIGNATURE

If you wanted to bet on which show at NYMF would get a commercial run, you probably wouldn't get very good odds for betting on *Life Could Be A Dream*. This jukebox from the creator of the Off Broadway hit *The Marvelous Wonderettes* is so determined to make the leap, no bookie would be foolish enough to bet against it by taking your wager.

It's easy to forget that once not so long ago, tunes like "Runaround Sue" and "Lonely Teardrops" were daring and controversial, that parents covered their ears over "nonsense" like "Rama Lama Ding Dong" instead of smiling from ear to ear. But gentle nostalgia is the one and only goal of *Life Could Be A Dream*, which was written and created by Roger Bean. Set mainly in the basement rumpus room of a teenager dreaming of pop stardom, it centers around the flimsiest of plots. Denny (Daniel Tatar) is convinced he's the next pop star and has his sights set on winning a local talent contest that promises the winner a recording contract.

He dragoons nerdy Eugene (Jim Holdridge) and preacher's son Wally (Ryan Castellino) isn't far behind. The jock, the nerd, and the closeted Wally need a sponsor for snazzy shirts and that means reaching out to a car dealership. Before you know it, their group has expanded to include Skip (Doug Carpenter), a grease monkey from the wrong side of the tracks and Lois (Victoria Matlock of *The Marvelous Wonderettes*), the daughter of the car dealership owner and the gal they all fall for. Pop songs like "Sh-Boom (*Life Could Be A Dream*)" and "Earth Angel" aren't far behind.



Even spending that much time describing the plot is almost more than the show bothers with. If Denny's mother tells him to stop wasting his time on pop dreams and get a job, that's more than enough of an excuse to sing "Get A Job," and frankly that's more justification than most of the songs get. The stock characters and banal jokes are harmless enough and the audience certainly gave the show warm applause. But anyone hoping for a little extra effort will hope in vain.

Certainly the cast was game, with the three young wanna-bes coming off the best. Unfortunately, they almost seem like afterthoughts once the show gets to Skip and Lois. (The guys are cast to seem much younger -- and smaller -- than the two lovebirds who are nominally the same age as them.) But whatever charms the three actors have (Tatar is amiable, Holdridge is game with the lame jokes and Castellino is appealing and handsome), those are lacking with Carpenter, who barely registers as the stolid Skip. He lacks any chemistry so Matlock (who was appealing in *The Marvelous Wonderettes*) is rather stranded as the girl who risks all for him.

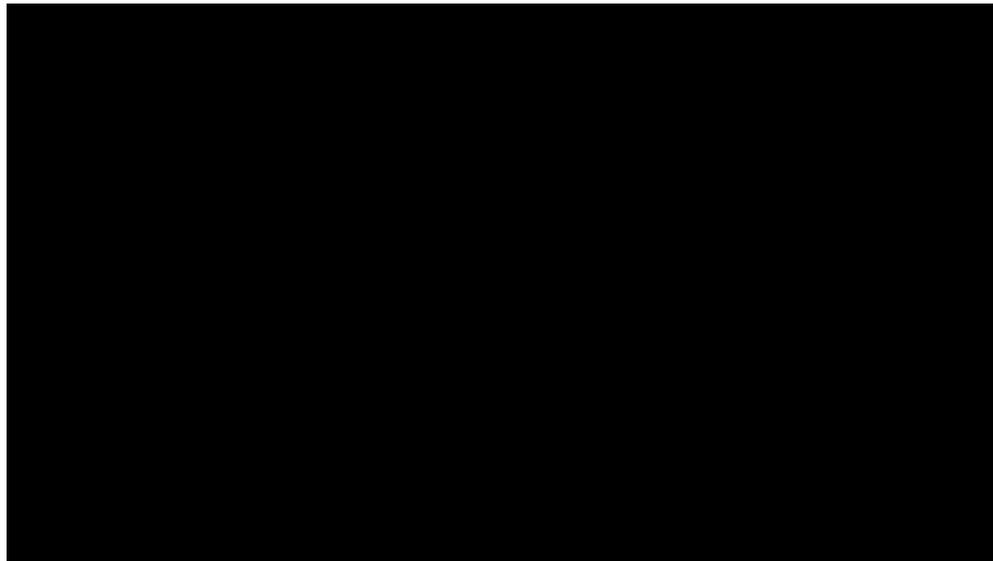
It's not until the encore that any attempt is made to present any of these familiar songs in a fresh or unexpected arrangement. But then comfort food of the musical sort is exactly what *Life Could Be A Dream* intends; . On that level, Bean directs capably, the choreography by Lee Martino is serviceable and the set (Michael Carnahan) and costumes (Bobby Pearce) get the job done on minimal resources.

MOTHER DIVINE ** out of ****
NYMF AT PEARL THEATRE COMPANY

During hard times, preachers with a gospel of wish fulfillment can draw big crowds. That must explain the success of Father Divine (Randy Donaldson), a Depression-era man of God. Or more precisely, a man who preaches he IS God. Yes, Father Divine says he is God and if you truly, truly believe in him, you'll never get sick and never die. He also says sex is a disgrace to the temple of the body so you know people must be really desperate if they reject sex and turn to a little man who insists he's God himself.

People do flock but it becomes rather inconvenient when Mother Divine (Danielle Lee Greaves) takes ill and dies. Father Divine soon solves that problem by insisting that Mother Divine has moved her soul from one body to another. And wouldn't you know that her soul migrated from the body of a full-figured black woman into a skinny white blonde girl who didn't seem to get the memo about sex being bad?

His faithful are doubting and a federal agent is going undercover to bust Father Divine on tax dodging or whatever else he can find. But the real trouble comes from the ghost of Mother Divine. She may be dead but she's not done with Father Divine yet.



An interesting set-up and a solid cast are wasted on a musical that raises a lot more questions than it answers and drops the ball on all sorts of possibilities. The book and lyrics by Laurel K. Vartabedian and music and arrangements by Bill G. Evans take quite a while to establish some facts. We slowly realize that Father Divine is NOT a shyster; he's not even a hypocrite about the sex thing, though it takes a while to figure this out and we do it more by the lack of hanky panky than anything anyone says. And his church is not being used to distribute drugs like the feds imagine.

So where exactly is the conflict? There isn't one. That problem is ignored since most of the show seems to forget about the very modest issue of Father Divine and focuses on his followers, who are soon falling in love with each other and wondering if

the whole no-sex thing is such a good idea after all. One member is chased after by her boyfriend, two others run off to Las Vegas, and Rose Pedone spends so much time stealing scenes with her nutty Carol Kane-like delivery that her character Miss Glo Ray barely gets a subplot at all.

Mike Longo makes a very good-looking Prodigal Son, a standout in the strong supporting cast. Randy Donaldson handles the acting of Father Divine with aplomb but has a not-so-convincing singing voice. Chris Sams as the Federal agent has to carry the weight of the non-existent plot and it shows, though he gives it the college try. Greaves has presence to spare as Mother Divine, looks great in her afterlife costume of all white (courtesy of Amy Price) and can sing the roof off the house. Unfortunately, few of the songs register strongly.

By the time we realize there's virtually no story to speak of in the show, it comes to a close. Adam Hester directs capably and the scenic design by Ryan McGettigan is nicely suggestive of the era (helped immeasurably by those costumes by Price, perhaps the show's strongest tech element). But with no obstacles to overcome and few good songs to paper over the meagre plot, the result is needless to say less than divine. Still, it's a good example of a show that might not work but attracted enough talent to make you feel your time was well spent. Surely some of the people involved will pop up in more shows down the road.

JULIAN PO ** 1/2 out of ****
NYMF AT SIGNATURE

This new musical with book and lyrics by Andrew Barrett and excellent music by Ira Antelis needs a lot of work. But it's unquestionably the creation of people with genuine talent. Set in a small town with Americana elements to match in the score, it begins winningly with the five member band singing that something big is about to happen. Austin Moorehead shows off his versatility on mandolin and guitar but they're all charming, albeit strong musically than as singers.

The show proper begins when Julian Po wanders into town. It's a town so small that any stranger is immediately an object of fascination. Who is he? What's he doing here? When's he going to go? The locals are beside themselves with questions until the town big wig Henry (Sean Cullen) corners the man after a day or two of fevered speculation and asks what exactly he's doing there. And who is he anyway? He's Julian Po (Chad Kimball of *Memphis*) and he's going to kill himself.

Rather than being horrified, they're all kind of excited. Pastor Bean (Malcolm Gets) is a rather befuddled man and is sure he should try and talk Julian Po out of it. Instead, Julian Po talks him into reading up on Charles Darwin. (Bean must be the last preacher in America who has never even heard of Charles Darwin. Surely he should say he's heard of him but admit he's never actually read Darwin. The talented Gets does what he can with this would-be free spirit.

Henry's wife Lilah (a terrific Luba Mason) wouldn't mind a tumble with Po but he's more drawn to Sarah (a delightful Corbin Reid) the frustrated wife of handsome Bobby. Since he's going to kill himself anyway, she figures, why not use this chance to get the baby she so desperately wants but Bobby can't seem to provide? The local tailor Tom Potter (an appealing Jason Gotay) would be honored to make Po a suit for the big event, little Izzy (Issadora Tulalian) just wants him to give fishing a try before he offs himself and the unhappy Bobby (who drinks and hears voices in his head) starts a pool about when Po will do the deed. To top it off, Henry gives the man a gun so he won't waste any time about it. In other words, this is not your typical small town.



(Photo by Steve Rosen)

The songs here are generally quite strong with a folksy charm that's very winning. Mason in particular kills with two terrific numbers, one an amusing seduction song and the other more dramatic and sad. But throughout the acting and writing and singing are generally of a very high standard.

The notable exception is unfortunately Julian Po. I never saw *Memphis* but Kimball's voice

was simply not up to par the performance I saw. His big early number is also vague and amorphous; it didn't really explain to me why Po wanted to kill himself and was self-consciously NOT in the Americana vein of the rest of the show. The fault is surely not all Kimball's because Po is the least interesting character in the musical.

That might not matter since he's really there as a catalyst to upend the lives of those around him. But when the first hint of romance has Po changing his mind about the whole suicide thing, the entire premise of the show is undermined. The stakes are pretty low if Po only needed a date to give up his dark thoughts. Other problems arise. Mason and Cullen have terrific chemistry as Lilah and Henry. He's constantly running her down but it seemed throughout to be the bluster of a man who was truly in love. So when we're suddenly told their marriage is over and she's leaving him (one of the many dramatic events Po's presence causes) it's surprising and unwelcome. Certainly it wasn't earned by any of their banter earlier in the show.

Tom is a closeted gay man and finally tells someone by unburdening himself with Po. Good! But stuck in that small town it's hard to imagine a truly happy future unless Tom leaves. It seems a likely solution is right in front of everyone. Bobby (the good-looking Jon Fletcher) is handsome and has a gorgeous wife but they're very unhappy (though they like each other). He gets drunk every night, can't get her pregnant and hides in his barber shop. Surely I'm not the only one who thought Bobby and his friend Tom might realize they had more in common. But weirdly, Bobby really is hearing voices in his head and might be having a breakdown. His dream is to be a movie star so he dumps everyone and heads off for Hollywood, mental issues unresolved. If anyone should be leaving town, it's Tom. And if those voices are meant to be a metaphor, they should clear that up. Bobby seems miserable with his life -- not a movie star in training -- and his departure feels like a lost opportunity to make both him and Tom happy.

Happily, these problems with the book and Po's determination or lack thereof are offset by some strong numbers. Then the show takes a very bold turn towards the finale. It's worth seeing for the talent involved even if you don't want to read about the final twist below.

SPOILER: Po decides he doesn't want to kill himself but the town intervenes and insists he has to do it or all the upheaval in their lives might slip away. It's an unexpected, potentially fascinating turn. It also makes no sense and is vaguely done. For a moment we get the sense perhaps Po already is dead and this town is limbo (they keep insisting he couldn't be stranded there).

But that's not what the creators intend. No, they just want to take a surprising tack. Suddenly Po doesn't want to die at all and they push him to it. This could be great, but as it is, it's not remotely convincing. We never believe Po wants to kill himself so their insistence he do it would undermine how much we've come to like the townspeople. Why are they suddenly murderous and selfish.

Then there's the final truly enigmatic line the show ends on, where Po has drowned and little Izzy seems to have caught him with a fishing hook and he tells her to join him. I don't know how else to interpret that except Po saying she should kill herself too and "join him," but WTF? She's finally got a mom and is quite happy, thanks very much.

I loved the dark turn but a lot of work is needed to make it come off. Kirsten Sanderson directed well though she can't resolve the mess at the end. And frankly they need to rethink their lead character: his desire to kill himself is so flimsy it throws the entire show off. Figuring that out will surely inform the finale. Clear up Bobby as well (does he need meds, a man or a manager?) and give Po a song worthy of the show he appears in and *Julian Po* could become as good as the many talented people involved.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***

The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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