
Theater: NYMF #3 -- Marriage, Magic, Mentors and Movies!

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The [New York Musical Theatre Festival](#) is almost over (it ends this Sunday) and it's proven itself again: I've seen several shows that are sure to have a future (including, I think, Broadway) and a lot of talented actors. Here are four more shows with three more before the weekend is over.

CROSSING SWORDS ***

CASTLE WALK ***

GARY GOLDFARB: MASTER ESCAPIST ** 1/2

MARRY HARRY **

CROSSING SWORDS ***

NYMF AT SIGNATURE THEATRE COMPANY

Ho-hum, another show about students performing a classic play, only to discover that their personal lives are mirroring the action onstage. Frankly, the only reason I bothered to attend *Crossing Swords* was the presence of director Igor Goldin, who helmed *Yank!*, one of my favorite musicals in recent years and one I still wait to see on Broadway.

So what a pleasant surprise to discover a sophisticated, warm-hearted musical with subtlety, a great cast, some strong tunes and ambition. It's already quite good but it should become even better with a little more work.

It's 1969 and an all-girls school and all-boys school are combining forces to stage a production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Jeremy and David are best friends: Jeremy is the theater guy and David's the handsome, ruby playing type. With a little cajoling and a promise that there will be girls and a chance to kiss one of them onstage, the affable David gives in to his buddy's wishes and signs up for the play. He's glad he did the moment David sets eyes on Nicky, a pretty, smart girl taking the female lead in the show. Along for the ride are two teachers: the life-embracing French woman Miss Daignault as director and the buttoned-up Brit known as Sir as chaperone.

Sure, Jeremy is gay, Sir is repressed and David isn't used to getting his heart broken. But creator Joe Slabe (who wrote the book, music and lyrics) isn't interested in laying on the angst or melodrama. The most refreshing aspect of this touching, well-done show is how likable and grounded all the characters prove to be. Even the teachers -- who begin as cliches -- grow on you during the rehearsals for the big show. And of course, it's a musical -- happily, this one has a clutch of very good songs including the friends-for-life number "The Three Of Us," act one closer "Heart On My Sleeve" (whose redundant lyrics in the chorus are raised up by a terrific melody), the soul-baring "For King and Country" and especially Jeremy's lilting "Let Me Be Your Cyrano."

Kudos first of all to the casting by Michael Cassara and his assistant Chelsea Ignagni. The adult actors -- Linda Balgord and Steven Hauck -- are pros, of course and bring complexity to their parts; but the three young leads are all new to me and all especially appealing. Marrick Smith (co-founder of the [theater troupe Hamlet Isn't Dead](#) and a writer in his own right) has the difficult role of the handsome, nice David and pulls it off with charm. (It's not easy to make nice interesting, though few

appreciate that.) He's matched by the lovely voiced **Ali Gordon** as Nicky, a girl you immediately want to spend time with, just like the boys do. **Lyle Colby Mackston** gets the plum lead role of Jeremy and nails it, singing and acting beautifully throughout. He also gets to deliver some of the best passages from *Cyrano*, including one scene re-contextualized to speak to his love for David that held the audience rapt with attention. All three are deeply likable actors and win you over from the start.

I might be imagining it but I believe director Goldin chose to have the kids do a better job in their rehearsals of scenes from *Cyrano* as the play progressed. They were always good, but each time they returned to the text their involvement in it (or perhaps its importance to their lives) had increased and their intensity increased as well. In any case, he directs with aplomb and sensitivity. One sure-fire way to spot an excellent cast and a smart director at the helm is to look at the characters who *aren't* talking. When you're know what they're thinking and feeling at any moment, you know you're in good hands.

Slabe has crafted a strong work and I can't wait to see it again after they've refined it even more. For example, Sir (Steven Hauck) bares his soul about his deep love for a "friend" who died during WW II in "For King and Country." But it's a blunt bit of exposition and comes early in the show without any real context. We're simply being told the reason for Sir's uptight nature and he's talking almost literally to himself. The song would be much more powerful if he were opening up to Miss Daignault (Linda Balgord). I know -- the entire point of Sir is that he's emotionally repressed. But maybe the photograph she accidentally spots of his dead friend could trigger the outpouring of emotion. He might immediately regret it while she spends the rest of the show trying to get him to open up some more. But at least he'd be telling it to *someone* and the song wouldn't feel so baldly expository. (It could just as easily be used as a moment of vulnerability when Sir speaks to Jeremy about the kid's "feelings" for David. If Jeremy denounced him after Sir offered up that deeply personal tale, the scene would be even more powerful.)

And I'm confused about Sir's journey. Towards the end of the show, he and Miss Daignault are doing a scene from *Cyrano*; they kiss and Sir says he's finally starting to live. Is he actually bi? The entire show we certainly had the impression Sir was a closeted gay man and that he and Miss Daignault were fated to be good friends, perhaps, at best. Do they have a romance? Whatever the intent, it seems cloudy at this stage. Of course, you want to have meaty parts to attract good actors. But I felt Sir and Miss sort of took over too much in the second act. Their subplot should remain just that and a climactic bit of comedy involving them might best be left to our imagination. It felt like a distraction from the emotional climax where the kids confronted each other once all the secrets about who liked who were out in the open.

As a small aside, Jeremy's passing reference to Judy Garland when talking to Nicky got perhaps the biggest laugh of the night. But it seems out of character, makes no sense given what they're discussing and should be cut. Even more unlikely is David's cutting reference to drag queens at Stonewall. Sure, the riots must have made the local news but it still feels like an unnecessary stretch. It would be more than enough to have David worry about what kind of life Jeremy might have. And David's too quick acceptance of his best friend feels rushed as well. We know he's a good guy and just a quick joke or telling comment would be enough to convince us he'll come around, especially when followed by the sweet image of all three of them clasping hands in a Three Musketeers fashion at the finale. Finally, the echoing of *Cyrano* when Jeremy unleashes a string of gay slurs is very clever and could be pushed even further; maybe it could start off amusingly and then get uglier and darker, putting an end to Sir's bland references to "philia."

As is, this is a smart and very enjoyable show bursting with talent both onstage and off, including the three actors at its core. I look forward to seeing each of them again -- hopefully in the next incarnation of *Crossing Swords*.

CASTLE WALK * NYMF AT PEARL THEATRE COMPANY**

I suppose you could turn *Castle Walk* into a movie. But this musical about the making of a Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers flick works best onstage. Why? Because their film is a bio-pic about an earlier dancing team, Vernon and Irene Castle. Irene is on the set of the RKO movie to offer technical advice and be flooded with memories about how it really was. So the stage is the perfect way to flow back and forth from scenes of her youth to on-set recreations to the behind the scenes tug of war between Irene and the movie's director. *Castle Walk's* director and choreographer Richard Stafford came up with the concept and Milton Granger (who wrote the book, music and lyrics, with additional material by Jere Lee Hodgkin) has delivered strongly.

Anchoring the show is Lynne Wintersteller as Irene Castle. Vernon died during World War I on a training flight and she's been married and divorced twice since. Eminently sensible, Irene knows her place in the pecking order and is under no illusions about how much she'll be able to influence the film. (For one thing, she can't stand Ginger Rogers but was helpless to prevent this most obvious bit of casting.) Still, she can't help herself. Their peak years of fame came long before the talkies so most memories of Vernon and what they accomplished are fading. This silly, distorted Hollywood movie is the last, best chance she has to set the record straight. And while it won't bring Vernon back, it's "Close Enough," as her, touching effective opening number makes clear.

The show moves nimbly along, most effectively when Irene recalls their early days and we see the "real" story of how she and the love of her life began their career. The songs are period appropriate and quite strong but this is a show where dance is central. Stafford does a good job, though I fear I never saw any flashes of brilliance that would have made clear exactly why Vernon and Irene became world famous. When the young lovers make their dancing debut in "She Dances Like An Angel" (with Vernon played by the charming Bret Shuford and the young Irene by the sweet Stephanie Rothenberg), it's cute but not a revelation.

Stafford's best moment in dance occurs during an antic night in Paris when they come into some easy money; Stafford shines here in revealing character and moving the story forward, helped along by "Let's Go Around The Town," one of Granger's best tunes. Other peaks where the music and dance come together beautifully include the scene where Vernon and Irene first meet on a beach and the moment where Irene dances with her younger self.

Another strength is the piece's realistic take on Hollywood and how the system would actually work. James Clow is very good as the director H.C. Potter, dealing capably with Irene's many "suggestions" by using flattery, misdirection, humor and bluntness as the moment demands.

The weaker moments generally involve the understandable desire to give secondary characters their big moment. "The Oscar" provides Lauren Sprague as Ginger Rogers the spotlight while she cravenly reveals her need for Hollywood's biggest award. The humor falls flat (through no fault of Sprague's) and frankly it would be better to have Rogers serve as an offstage foil for Irene. Our imagination and hints as to how they're interacting is much richer than what happens when Rogers gets to lay it all out.

Similarly, "Crash!" needs a focus. This is the big number for Walter (Wayne W. Pretlow), the manager of the Castles in their heyday. Irene is talking to her memory of Walter and wonders if she should create a stink over the liberties the movie is taking with their friendship and her life. He delivers "Crash!," which is an amusing comic turn that the strong Pretlow delivers well. But if it has anything to do with the crisis Irene is facing, it was too oblique to register with me.

Finally, there's the director's big number, "Pills." He's feeling the pressure of dealing with Castle though, as he correctly states at the end, as far as being a pain in the ass is concerned she's a rank amateur. But here comes "Pills," an elaborate sequence in which Potter imagines Irene taking over his set, behaving imperiously and creating a nightmare for all involved. It took me a bit to realize her behavior was a fantasy sequence taking place in his brain. More to the point, having her act out like this in the fantasy scene undercuts the real outburst she delivers shortly after, blunting the impact of her pain in the show's most dramatic moment. Finally, Irene is given two big numbers right at the end when just having one would deliver more impact.

Similarly, her touching final moment is immediately followed by a curtain call dance featuring three pairs of performers which detracts from the sweet goodbye we've just experienced. It makes no sense to step on her final scene like this; if anyone should dance as a capper surely it should be her younger self and Vernon. Better yet, following the final bows with everyone dancing in pairs the way they do is exactly the right way to do it. Just cut the trio. Much as the talented performers deserve the attention, emotionally it works against the ending of the show.

Clow really is good as the director and Rothenberg as young Irene has a lovely way. But it's Vernon and the mature Irene you'll remember best. Shuford is immensely appealing; you don't doubt for a moment that Irene would fall immediately in love and carry a torch for him the rest of her life. Who wouldn't? And Wintersteller is wonderful as Irene -- wry, appealing, no-nonsense but revealing the steel that made her a star so many years ago. She carries the show with grace and charm. Unlike the Astaire and Rogers vehicle, *Castle Walk* is a fitting testament to this duo and Wintersteller is the principal reason why.

GARY GOLDFARB: MASTER ESCAPIST ** 1/2 NYMF AT SIGNATURE THEATRE COMPANY

This new musical about a high school kid who dreams of winning the talent contest with his magic act has a sweet, low-key charm and a lot of talent onstage. It gets better and better as the story encompasses fat guys and bullying in a simple, direct fashion which avoids an After School aura. Unfortunately, it goes off the rails towards the end with a fantastical, complicated twist that spoils the believable pleasures of what came before. But there's a lot to admire and a very good show waiting to emerge if they're willing to rethink the second half.

Jared Loftin plays the pudgy Gary Goldfarb, a loner whose Jewish mother kvetches every time he brings up magic and says maybe he should get some other hobbies like a normal boy. Loftin holds the spotlight with ease and makes Gary a real character rather than, say, a sad sack loser, figure of humor or worse a too-plucky kid. Gary really is an oddball and that's okay; Loftin never tries to make him cooler than he is.

That's okay with us, but not so okay with his schoolmates. Kenny Krumholtz (an amusingly broad James David Larson) is only slightly above Gary in the pecking order of high school but reminds our hero of it at every chance. Kenny is doing his own magic act in the talent show and is determined to stop Gary from competing. Gary is pushed around by the bully Tyler (Dimitri Moise), who demands milk money and then laughs when he realizes Gary is smitten by the super-hot Cheryl Samatasinghar-Stein, the school's Jewish-Indian princess (a very funny Shoba Narayanan).

Of course, Gary can't see that the girl for him is the wheelchair riding Penelope Spry (a good Krista Buccellato, who like Loftin does not try to make Penelope cooler than she is). Whenever moments get stressful, Gary is tempted by the lunchroom chef Ms. Salmonelli (MaryAnne Piccolo, who also plays his mother and has a blast in both roles). Rounding out the cast is Todd Thurston as a teacher and mentor.

The show begins very strongly with Gary fantasizing about an elaborate stage show where he does great magic tricks ("Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist"), comes back down to earth because of his weight ("Fat Kids/There's No Future In Fat") and expresses his love for magic with an ode to his hero in "Harry Houdini."

Omri Schein wrote the book and lyrics and James Olmstead wrote the catchy music. Their show is well directed by John Znidarsic. When it focuses on the real Gary and his real problems in a generally real setting, it shines. It's funny and convincing when the Valley Girl-ish Cheryl turns down Gary's request to be his assistant with disdain. It's convincing and sad when Gary cluelessly turns down Penelope's offer to do the job. You also have to love the adolescent way Gary ends his every scene with Penelope in a rushed, gulped manner that's very funny. Right up to the moment of crisis when Gary discovers his act is not eligible for the talent show, this musical doesn't miss a beat.

Then the satirical and fantastical take over. "Kenny's Song (Cutting Things)" reveals Kenny to be a masochistic terror; it's played off for laughs at the end but the humor feels out of place in the generally real world Gary inhabits. "Oy, Mon Dieu" has Gary being urged on to greatness and told that many great magicians were Jewish. But Gary has already revealed his passion for magic and knowledge of its history at the top of the show, so this big number feels unnecessary and emotionally redundant.

Worse is the talent show sequence where we have to sit through three other acts. They're all sort of funny in their way, but it feels more like padding. Tyler's act in particular feels misguided. We've known throughout the show his character is gay, even if the bullying Tyler doesn't know it himself. He keeps hinting at the mysterious act he'll be performing at the talent show, so it's no surprise when Tyler turns out to be a dancing fool and delivers a shirtless exercise in modern dance that anyone else would know screams "gay." But it's played for laughs when Tyler suddenly realizes it himself onstage and freaks out. Either he should remain clueless about what he's done and just proud of his dancing (and lord knows the fit Moise has every right to be proud of his skill in this generally amusing role) or actually come out via dance. The scene tries to have it both ways and ends up taking advantage of Tyler in unintended ways.

SPOILER: Finally, in a weirdly misguided finale, Gary attempts an elaborate escape trick and drowns in the process. He goes to Magician Heaven, meets many of his heroes, gets a pep talk and is then sent back to earth for another chance. But Gary has been a level-headed, grounded kid the entire show. He's not deluded about his skills or in need of bucking up by his idols. He's got a good head on his shoulders, which is precisely the appeal of Gary throughout. Coming back to earth and then roundly dissing the bullies and choosing to be with Penelope? Well Gary would have done that anyway without a trip to the afterlife.

Those later missteps don't change the fact that for two-thirds of this show the creative team delivered a very funny, appealing musical with some excellent songs and a lot of warmth. Their cast is also strong from top to bottom with Piccolo especially good in her dual roles while Loftin anchors the show with nebbishy ease.

MARRY HARRY **
NYMF AT SIGNATURE THEATRE COMPANY

A good cast can't rescue this overstuffed romantic comedy that is overloaded with plot. A simple tale of love is lost amidst all these twists: a cheating fiancée, a man who likes to flirt with younger women but loves his wife, a medical crisis, a failing restaurant, a downtown artist's video project, a young man dreaming of snagging a new job with a famous chef, a scheme for a new business, a first date, a ticking clock when it comes to having babies and most crucially a whirlwind marriage proposal followed almost immediately by cold feet.

Whew! Cut out about half of these extraneous elements (and more I didn't mention) and you might just discover the sweet little romance waiting to get out.

It starts out simply enough. Little Harry (the charming Robb Sapp) is 30 years old. He lives at home with his dad and works in the family restaurant. But he's talented and dreams of more than slinging out food at a place whose gimmick is to change the menu every night of the week (Chinese followed by Italian and so on). Little Harry has applied for a job with the famous chef Lidia and if he gets it, how will he break the news to his dad? First, his dad Big Harry (Philip Hoffman, also charming) has to break the news to Little Harry that the restaurant is three months behind on its rent and in danger of eviction.

The landlord is the wealthy and imperious Francine (a very good Jane Summerhays) but the news of impending doom is lightened by Little Harry connecting with Francine's daughter Sherri (the fresh-faced, girl next door **Jillian Louis**). Before you know it, they're out on a date that very same day (even though Jillian is literally still reeling from dumping her cheat of a fiancée) and after a magical, romantic evening Harry impulsively asks her to marry him.

Complications ensue -- Francine wants to have the marriage right away since the event has already been booked and paid for; everyone starts talking about babies because Sherri isn't getting any younger; and less than a day after he proposed Harry is freaking out and having second thoughts. In a strained subplot to further complicate things, Harry becomes part of a video project of downtown artist Ping (Kate Rigg in a thankless role) just so Sherri can mistakenly and rather unconvincingly accuse Harry of cheating on her.

The show is jammed full of so many little subplots and stories (the book is by Jennifer Robbins) that it practically tips over while you watch. Harry makes killer biscotti so we spend ten minutes thinking and singing about biscotti as Sherri plans to launch a new business around them, thus rescuing their floundering business. This idea is practically never mentioned again. Harry's dad and his dad's wife Debby (the winning Annie Golden) have their own back and forth when Big Harry flirts with younger women once too often...and then wastes their vacation money on a toupee.

It's all much too much, especially since a whirlwind romance has its own real complications without all the artificial roadblocks placed in the way of Little Harry and Sherri. Trim back all the excess and you could have a sweet show, though it would be quite different from the show they've mounted.

The low points include the tepid satire of downtown artists that Rigg must try and put across. Cameron Folmar is a good actor and handles multiple roles well but he's burdened with two even worse clichés. He must play a gay wedding planner (a cliché and nothing more, as written) and worst of all an infantilized waiter in a Vietnamese restaurant who sings in fractured English and clutches his crotch at the end because he's turned on. It's tasteless, though miraculously Folmar is good enough to lessen the sting of a role that would be awful even if played by an Asian actor.

On the plus side, all the parents involved are played with brio. And Jillian Louis and Robb Sapp have talent and good chemistry as our lovers. They get to shine in the show's best numbers, like "Marry Me" and "More Than Make Believe." Other good numbers like "Harry's Way" and "Lidia" (the music is by Dan Martin and the lyrics by Michael Biello) convince that if the team could get out of their own way and refocus on the strengths of the story, they could deliver a good show.

One little note: surely when Little Harry and Sherri are meeting at the finale he should share his big news about that job with Lidia. You can't ask for a clearer sign of being in love than wanting to immediately tell that special person something important to you. Having Harry fail to tell Sherri the exciting news he just heard is bizarre and sends the wrong message.

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
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***

NYMF: *Crossing Swords* ***

NYMF: *Bend In The Road* *** 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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