

April 29, 2014

HUFF  
POST ENTERTAINMENT

## Theater: New Musical 'Giant' Has Big Ambitions...And Scores

Posted: 11/16/2012 1:17 am

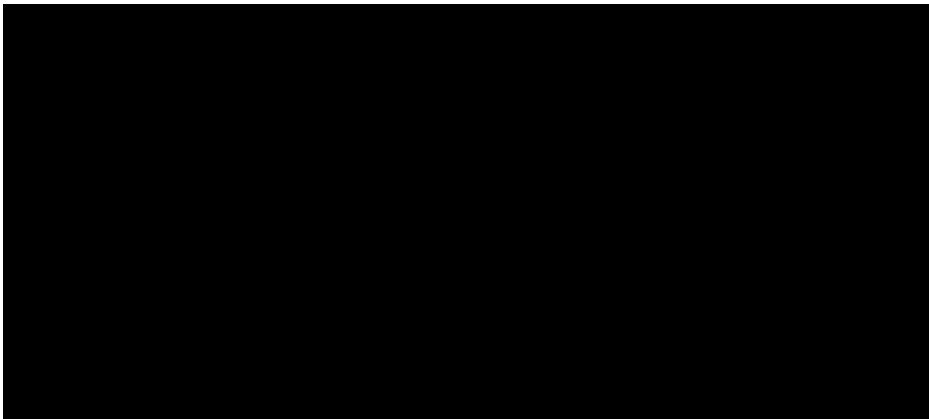
**GIANT** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**PUBLIC THEATER, NYC**

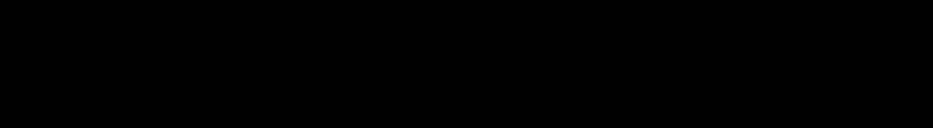
It's your choice: try and grab a ticket now while this show is at the Public or you'll be buying a ticket to see it on Broadway. Don't worry if you can't snag a seat during its very limited run (which I assume will be extending at least a little). *Giant* is a wonderfully intimate and complex show, but it will fill up a Broadway stage with ease.

You know the story from the novel by Edna Ferber or the somewhat leaden film best known for containing James Dean's final performance. *Giant* tells the story of Texas and it tells the story of Bick Benedict which amounts to the same thing. Spanning almost thirty years, the show begins like the novel, with Bick and his wife Leslie (Kate Baldwin) having it out late in their marriage and then jumps back in time to show where it all began.

Bick is a rancher, burning with a passion to breed cattle and feed the world, working side by side with his tough as leather sister Lux (Michele Pawk). Imagine her shock when Bick is sidetracked from marrying the girl next door (mind you, "next door" is 80 miles away) and comes home from a trip with a new thoroughbred horse and a new bride. Then the soap opera really begins: ranch hand Jett Rink (PJ Griffith in the James Dean role) develops a hankering for Leslie and an even bigger hankering for money when he strikes oil on what was thought to be a worthless scrap of land.

Soon a dark stain is seeping in everywhere: Leslie feels the town (essentially owned by Bick) features shabby homes for their workers. She tries to befriend the Mexicans, learn Spanish and open Bick's heart to injustice all at the same time. He just wants to rope and ride the range and be a rancher. In the nimble book by Sybille Pearson, we speed along until their two children are young adults with daughter Lil Lux (Mackenzie Mauzy) clearly in love with the ranch while the stammering, bookish son Jordy (Bobby Steggert) has his mother's social conscience -- the fact that dating a Mexican girl is an act of rebellion is just icing on the cake.





On and on the story tumbles, but that's the bare bones plot. This is a musical with songs and score by Michael John LaChiusa and it's his most tuneful work since *The Wild Party* (that woefully unappreciated show that will be a hit when it's revived some day soon). Without sacrificing any of the sophistication he has always been capable of and wisely without trying to incorporate a heavy Texas twang, LaChiusa delivers a collection of songs that are both direct and very ambitious.

The show begins quietly and the first song is in Spanish, a charmer called "Aurelia Dolores." It establishes a pattern. Without becoming heavy-handed and turning this melodrama into an issue show, the Mexican roots of Texas and its people are always present -- often as servants, mind you, but sometimes as love interests and always as people. Spanish songs appear throughout the show at key moments and Mexican characters give voice to their dreams. This isn't a modernizing touch: Ferber was a member of the Algonquin Circle and not an author of bodice-rippers. Her works often contained a strong focus on racial prejudice and other social issues (notably *Show Boat*, of course).

We then launch into Bick's love of the land, "Did Spring Come To Texas?," a tune that might have come from *Oklahoma*, musically if not geographically. Brian D'Arcy James has a quiet strength throughout the show that anchors it perfectly. And he's matched every moment by Kate Baldwin as Leslie. Their easy intimacy in her father's library just minutes after meeting makes you believe in love at first sight. Like Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor in the film version, they are both stars of the first order. Unlike Hudson, James can really act and they both sing with ease.

This is a decades-spanning show but it never feels "big" as in a spectacle. Director Michael Greif keeps a laser focus on these characters. There are rousing moments like a BBQ hoedown, a wedding that slides painfully into a funeral, and a wonderfully restrained finale but this is not a widescreen epic. You're always leaning into to listen and watch, not blown back by unnecessary fuss.

Greif's rare misstep here in his direction is with Pawk as Luz. She's a fine actress but goes too far over into hokum in her acting and singing, signaling her disdain for Bick's new wife in such broad terms it feels more like Ma Kettle. She barks out "No Time For Surprises" and then treats Leslie with such venom, you expect her to twirl a mustache. It's just a question of tamping her down, since essentially Pawk is well cast. With this show, less is definitely more.

Similarly, Katie Thompson has a knock-'em-dead show-stopper in Act One with "He Wanted A Girl," the song where she reveals her pain over losing Bick (the only man she's ever loved and the person both families intended her to marry). Did she have to lose him to this new girl who's afraid of wide open spaces and doesn't know a thing about ranching? It's a bravura turn she delivers in a marvelous voice, only to spoil the mood just a tad by over-acting in the next moment when talking to Leslie. (Perhaps her emotions got the best of her?) Thompson has already completely won us over; she doesn't need to do a thing in the scene after that and we'll still ache for her. (She's just as good in her second act number "Midnight Blues," part of a genuinely wonderful scene where she, Leslie and a friend all share painful secrets that should play as melodrama but feels real to life.)

"Heartbreak Country" is the rare number that doesn't ring quite true; perhaps it's trying to embody some Texas sentiment? It falls short and feels forced lyrically (though not musically). But it's soon followed by "Topsy-Turvy," a playful song between Leslie and Bick when they're in a hotel room trying to do something other than bicker all the time. And "My Texas" ends the act well with a rousing defense of their "country" (Texans rather annoyingly refer to their state as their country, as Bick makes clear). It doesn't come without hints of further darkness -- Bick's son Jordy insists on stammering out the real facts about the Alamo and Texas (such as the inconvenient truth that the Mexicans were

there first and the whites are the real immigrants).

Up to this point, *Giant* has been a very well sung, brisk, entertaining show with a fine, large cast, some great open skies for a vista thanks to the lighting by Kenneth Posner and effective, judicious sets by Allen Moyer. The hair and wig design by David Brian Brown along with the costumes by Jeff Mahshie effectively capture the passage of time with young people growing older and adults growing old. I'll need to see the show again to figure out how they do it, but all that pipe-laying in the first act, all that complex story that Pearson fits in without making the show feel too much like a soap opera bears fruit in the second act. That's where *Giant* reaches peaks of genuine greatness.

Like so many of the best moments in the show, the second act begins quietly. Bick is out on the range, commiserating with the memory of his now-dead sister Luz in "I Miss Our Mornings." Then he launches into a number that is a companion piece to that Rodgers & Hammerstein classic "Soliloquy." In that song, of course, a young man is about to become a father and fantasizes about what it will be like to have a son...and then worries about the heavy responsibility of having a girl. In Bick's soliloquy "That Thing," an essentially decent father struggles with the reality of being a dad, loving his son and yet feeling that they have absolutely nothing in common, while reveling in the bond he enjoys with his daughter. It's a moving, complex number that James navigates beautifully.

It's immediately followed by another winner, "Jump," a showcase for three younger characters. Angel (the charming Miguel Cervantes, very good in a very brief role) is getting married and then going off to fight WW II. Lil Luz (Mackenzie Mauzy) wants her independence but is drawn to Bobby (devilishly handsome Jon Fletcher), a boy who loves ranching just as much as she. They all sing "Jump," a delightful winner about taking chances, with Angel prodding Jordy to ask Juana (the pretty and sweet Natalie Cortez) out on a date, telling Bobby to let Lil Luz know he likes her too and then maybe they can work together so Angel can have some alone-time with his intended. It's a charmer rooted in character thanks to the staging, the singing and the choreography by Alex Sanchez, which is discretely strong throughout but really gets to shine here.

That's followed by yet another delight: "There Is A Child," a song in which Jordy's sweetheart Juana expresses her dreams and they innocently flirt. LaChiusa expresses Juana's acceptance of Jordy and his speech defect by giving Cortez a song that begins with her remembering English lessons from her sister -- she practiced her "wh's" by saying "who" and "what" and "where" and so on while speaking into her hand to feel the breath. She shows him the technique, a simple gesture that acknowledges she knows what it's like to struggle to speak. Jordy, shyly dipping his head but also daring to look her in the eye, practices his "wh's" too and breathes on her hand, in an intimate elocution lesson that echoes the classic *My Fair Lady*. Steggert is an asset to any show and one of the best talents in theater today. He captures Jordy's gentle but abashed habit of looking down, his refusal to keep quiet even when it's difficult to talk and the passionate heart that will drive him to fulfill his mother's thwarted dreams of making a difference.

The melodrama kicks in again, but it feels more deserved now. The show barrels along, with Jett given a rousing barn-burner about the changing times called "The Dog Is Gonna Bark." (It's no surprise to read that Griffith fronts a rock band, after seeing his commanding performance on this.) Among the many wise decisions of Pearson (who also did the book for *Baby*) was the choice to not build up the rivalry of Bick and Jett more than it needs. Jett is still drawn to Leslie and marries a beauty queen look-alike (heck, he even flirts with Leslie's daughter), but it's detailed quickly and neatly and then life goes on. Throughout, the show manages to capture the tumble and turmoil of the times. But since it doesn't pretend to tie up loose ends or follow every sub-plot to their finale, it feels more like a slice of life than the daytime serial that was the feature film *Giant*.

There's still one more remarkable number: it's the scene that we saw at the beginning where Bick and Leslie are having it out, discovering if there's anything left worth fighting for in their marriage. The show ends back where it began with "The Desert," a stunner performed to perfection by James and Baldwin (who is luminous and grounded throughout). They seesaw through emotions, detail their heartbreaks, discuss their dreams

and end on a quiet note of hope as Leslie points out they don't have to agree on everything, they just have to keep talking. The couple clasps hands and the show is essentially over.

But there's a coda, with Jordy and Juana sharing a moment of hope; Steggert as always wins us over with ease and Cortez matches him. Even here, the show doesn't go for a rousing, big number that might have felt forced, "all hat and no cattle" as they say. There's a brief surge in singing on the chorus, but by the end it's just a young married couple facing the future as their family and friends -- both living and dead -- stand beside them in a moment of simple solidarity.

Small adjustments in some of the performances and a tightening of Act One (though God knows it's pretty condensed already) should make what is already one of the best musicals of the year even better. I think the Tony Award season just got a lot more interesting: the spring musical *Matilda* has some serious competition if this show transfers as it should. And Michael John LaChiusa may have found the popular success his talent has augured for so long.

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

*As You Like it* (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) \*\*\*\*

*Chimichangas And Zoloff* \*

*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

*The Last Smoker In America* \*\*

*Gore Vidal's The Best Man* (w new cast) \*\*\*

*Into The Woods at Delacorte* \*\* 1/2

*Bring It On: The Musical* \*\*

*Bullet For Adolf* \*

*Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc.* \*\*

*Harrison, TX* \*\*\*

*Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck"* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2

*Pink Milk* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2

*Who Murdered Love* (FringeNYC) no stars

*Storytime With Mr. Buttermen* (FringeNYC) \*\*

*#MormonInChief* (FringeNYC) \*\*

*An Interrogation Primer* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*

*An Evening With Kirk Douglas* (FringeNYC) \*

*Sheherizade* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*The Great Pie Robbery* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Independents* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Dick and The Rose* (FringeNYC) \*\*  
*Magdalen* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Bombsheltered* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Paper Plane* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Rated M For Murder* (FringeNYC) \*\* 1/2  
*Mallory/Valerie* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Non-Equity: The Musical!* (FringeNYC) \*  
*Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame* (FringeNYC) \*\*\* 1/2  
*City Of Shadows* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking* \*\*\*  
*Salamander Starts Over* (FringeNYC) \*\*\*  
*Pieces* (FringeNYC) \*  
*The Train Driver* \*\*\*  
*Chaplin The Musical* \* 1/2  
*Detroit* \*\* 1/2  
*Heartless at Signature* \*\*  
*Einstein On The Beach* at BAM \*\*\*\*  
*Red-Handed Otter* \*\* 1/2  
*Marry Me A Little* \*\*  
*An Enemy Of The People* \*\* 1/2  
*The Old Man And The Old Moon* \*\*\* 1/2  
*A Chorus Line at Papermill* \*\*\*  
*Helen & Edgar* \*\*\*  
*Grace* \* 1/2  
*Cyrano de Bergerac* \*\*  
*Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* \*\*\*  
*Disgraced* \*\*  
*Annie* \*\* 1/2  
*The Heiress* \*\*  
*Checkers* \*\* 1/2  
*Ivanov* \*\*\*  
*Golden Child* at Signature \*\* 1/2  
*Giant* at the Public \*\*\* 1/2  
*Scandalous* \* 1/2  
*Forever Dusty* \*\*  
*The Performers* \*\*  
*The Piano Lesson* at Signature \*\*\* 1/2  
*Un Ballo In Maschera* at the Met \*\*\* 1/2 (singing) \* (production) so call it \*\* 1/2  
*A Christmas Story: The Musical* \*\*  
*The Sound Of Music* at Papermill \*\*\*  
*My Name Is Asher Lev* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Golden Boy* \*\*  
*A Civil War Christmas* \*\* 1/2  
*Dead Accounts* \*\*  
*The Anarchist* \*  
*Glengarry Glen Ross* \*\*  
*Bare* \*\*  
*The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* \*\* 1/2  
*The Great God Pan* \*\* 1/2

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](http://www.twitter.com/michaelgiltz)**