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Michael Giltz
Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: October 18, 2010 03:49 PM

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Theater: New York Musical Festival (NYMF) Roundup

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Whew! I am musicaled out. If no one breaks into song for the next few weeks, I'll be happy. But I'm also satisfied: the **New York Musical Theatre Festival** is a chance to gorge on new works, spot some talent and maybe see an early version of a show that will turn into a hit Off Broadway or even on Broadway. It's an annual event, though NYMF also sponsors year-round events to support musical theater. Out of about 27 fully-staged musicals, I managed to check out 13. Here's a rundown of the shows in the order I saw them, along with links to my full reviews on [AOL's gay blog Queersighted](#), where you'll usually find video clips and links to their official websites. (The last few

will be posted in the next day or so.)

NIGHTTIME TRAFFIC ** out of **** -- Alex Wyse wrote the book, music, and lyrics for this tale of two young lovers who turn the night before major surgery for one of them into an epic adventure thanks to a friendly nurse with drugs that can turn a minute into an hour of experience. Too many of the numbers are wan art songs, but a few promising numbers show that Wyse has the talent to do more.

WITHOUT YOU ***1/2 out of **** -- Anthony Rapp's one-man show is based on his acclaimed memoir *Without You*, which charts the rather remarkable experience of being in the world-beating, life-changing hit Broadway musical *Rent* while dealing with two tragedies: the sudden unexpected death of the show's composer Jonathan Larson and the slow decline and death from cancer of Rapp's mother as *Rent* moves from a tiny workshop to Broadway. At the end of the show, Rapp is at a memorial for his mother, singing the funeral number piece from *Rent*, "Without You." Suddenly you realize again why that show about downtown artists struggling with AIDS proved such a hit: pain and loss (and carrying on) are universal.

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This polished, lovingly done and very moving work just proves that again.

TESS: THE NEW MUSICAL ** out of **** -- The ambition outstrips the talent of sister act Annie and Jenna Pasqua when they tackle the classic Thomas Hardy novel. The result longs for *Les Miz* but is more akin to the bland Frank Wildhorn, though Nick Cartell is a standout as the angry, passionate Angel.

SHOW CHOIR ** out of **** -- The cast is fine overall, and Gary Slavin (who directed and co-choreographed with Donald Garverick) sometimes makes you feel like something original is about to happen. But the book, music, and lyrics by Mark McDaniels and Garverick let them all down. Undoubtedly the show was created by people with a genuine love for show choirs. Nonetheless, it feels like the entire enterprise has its cynical eye on an off-Broadway run for undemanding tourists, right down to mildly naughty twists (Two of the show choir guys are gay? Gasp!) and the unfunny spoofs of Regis Philbin and Kelly Ripa. The cleverly mocking opener and the genuine emotion of "Back Row" prove they have the talent, if only they're willing to skip the easy stabs at humor and standard plot points, and then dig much deeper. Even silliness needs to be taken seriously.

BLOOD TIES *** out of **** -- Ned Massey is the guy in the bar who collars you with what sounds like a tall tale: he was the last guy discovered by legendary talent scout John Hammond, who also signed Billie Holiday, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Aretha Franklin....you get the idea. But Hammond suffered a heart attack while they were recording Massey's debut and one bad bit of luck followed another as Massey struggled to turn that early break into an honest to goodness career. This autobiographical show tells his story and of course might just be the one last chance he has at success. Massey is a clear-eyed presence and he's surrounded by a very able cast. George McDaniel and Nancy Ringham are solid but more effective in secondary parts than in their main roles as father and mother. But the shining presence here is Katie Thompson, who is exceptional as Massey's girlfriend and later as another lover who becomes his wife, knocking out songs with country abandon whenever called for and making us like Massey more just because she likes him too. Wherever this show goes, she better go with it.

POPART * out of **** -- A bland teenage girl who complains that she always blends in during high school -- even with a drunk of a mom and a gay dad -- heads off to art school. There she meets kooky characters, loosens up, discovers she's a wildly talented artist who just needs to let her freak flag fly, and scores big at the annual art show for critics. That's the entire plot of POPart The Musical. However familiar and predictable it may sound, that doesn't really matter if the songs are good. Unfortunately, the songs by Daryl Lisa Fazio (book and lyrics) and Aaron McAllister (music) don't liven up the tale one bit.

FROG KISS *** 1/2 out of **** -- *Frog Kiss* is not just a heck of a show by the standards of a festival devoted to nurturing new work (the raison d'etre of the New York Musical Theatre Festival). It's a heck of an entertaining musical comedy by any standards, Broadway included, which is where it deserves to be, current cast right along with it. At the very least, *Frog Kiss* deserves a much longer life off-Broadway or anywhere else you can get tickets. For all the talent on display (and that includes virtually everyone), the revelation for me was the catchy, jazzy music by Eric Schorr and the book and lyrics by Charles Leipart, a talent completely unknown to me but one that is apparently flowering right now with numerous works like a musical version of *Enchanted April* and an original show called *Lady on a Carousel* at various stages of development. Here he's delivered a musical in the vein of *Once Upon A Mattress* and *Honk!* and it's a winner.

FELLOWSHIP! * 1/2 out of **** -- I'm geeky enough to have seen two musicals based on *The Lord of the Rings*: the official, lavish Toronto and West End production that seemed like a bad joke when it was announced, and now *Fellowship!*, a musical parody that is a bad joke and playing as part of the New

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York Musical Theatre Festival. One show cost tens of millions and featured a Celtic air, elaborate special effects, puppets, and would-be show-stoppers. The other show cost tens of dollars (in a good way) and also features a Celtic air, not to mention rock guitars, puppets, a would-be show stopper, and other silliness. Neither one has very good songs.

TRAV'LIN' *** out of **** -- Broadway used to produce breezy entertainment like Trav'lin -- "the new 1930s Harlem Musical" -- in its sleep. Now it seems like a minor miracle. The recipe is simple: take a body of songs by a talented if under-appreciated artist, in this case JC Johnson. (No, I'd never heard of him either, but since he co-wrote songs with the likes of Fats Waller and Andy Razaf I wasn't surprised to recognize a few of his tunes.) Then build a romantic comedy around them, fill the cast with talented actors and boom, you've got a show. This one is sure to have a future production. Yes, you can map out the entire plot about ten minutes into the show and you won't care a whit. Karla Mosley and Michael Jean Dozier have wonderful chemistry as the young lovers, though Mosley is still mimicking her betters when she goes for the red hot mamma notes. Soara-Joye Ross and Randy Donaldson milk every laugh out of their battles, with Donaldson having the weakest voice in an otherwise strong-singing cast but making up for it with charisma and comic timing to spare. Doug Eskew is simply a rock as George and holds the stage with aplomb, which is not easy to do when Brenda Braxton is commandeering it as Billie, the heart and soul of the show.

FINGERS AND TOES ** 1/2 out of **** -- The set-up is simple. Fingers, a composer facing writer's block when it comes to his symphony, is despondent. His buddy Toes appears with some amazing news. A famed producer is coming in two weeks to check out their show and maybe book it into one of his resorts. The only problem? They don't have a musical. Yet. The guys start by auditioning broads and you don't get any points for knowing that the last gal to show up ("Sorry I'm late!") will prove a game one, who can sing and dance and (bummer) has a boyfriend. That ain't gonna last. Medland has a definite gift but he's limited here to a narrow range of emotion and style. The same is true of his book, which has too many jokes that call for a rim shot from the band. Jonathan Monro is a solid foil as Fingers for the brash Leo Ash Evens as Toes, the ladykiller and razzle-dazzler. But they're both outshone by Stephanie Gibson as Molly Molloy. She can do it all and no wonder they both fall for her, but hard. This particular show has probably gone as far as it should, but Medland and his cast will surely be going farther.

THE GREAT UNKNOWN ** 1/2 out of **** -- Nice ambitious tale about a group of explorers heading out west in the post Civil War era. A good cast and some stand out tunes by Jim Wann. This one might need to be substantially longer in order to do its story and solid cast justice.

OUR COUNTRY * out of **** -- A country superstar is outed and watches his career implode. This show is his comeback concert in the back of a seedy gay bar. Think Hedwig crossed with Ty Herndon. Unfortunately, the songs by Tony Asaro are country only in the vaguest sense (references to mud flaps and the such) and lead performer Justin Utley has a voice much more suited to Broadway. There's not a twang within a mile of this show, even taking into account that "country" covers everything from the pop of Taylor Swift and Antebellum to the rock of Steve Earle and Dwight Yoakum to traditional fare like Randy Travis. Whatever country music is, it ain't this. And the book isn't any better, though Jeremy Pasha squeezes out a few modest laughs as a gay keyboardist.

SHINE! THE HORATIO ALGER MUSICAL ** 1/2 out of **** -- A plucky lad in 1800s New York City pulls himself up by his bootstraps, thanks to hard work, a cheerful demeanor and a fair amount of luck. You could play those corny Horatio Alger tales for laughs or -- like Shine! -- you could play it straight. The result is a very handsome production with a large cast and some modest props ably directed by Peter Flynn and choreographed by Devanand Janki to maximum effect. Unfortunately, the songs by Roger Anderson and Lee Goldsmith just don't deliver, whether it's the tepid love ballad "Maybe Today" (repeated again and again), the cynical "Cock and Bull" or the comic "A Handful O' Hops" (which is actually not bad, but comes far too late in the story, when suspense should be the focus, not comic relief). Andy Mientus has the right wholesome but not dopey air for our hero, but without good songs, what's a street urchin to do?

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 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.

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