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**Michael Giltz**

Freelance writer

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## Theater: New York Musical Theatre Festival (NYMF) #1 Kissless, Crazy, Cartoonish!

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The [New York Musical Theatre Festival](#) (or NYMF) is one of my favorite events of the year. You get a chance to see dozens of musicals (50 in all this year) in a few weeks -- some fully staged, some barebones, some just readings, some terrible, some great, and a lot with promising elements. But it comes hard on the heels of FringeFestNYC, another great event, and smack dab at the beginning of the fall season, so I always worried it got a little lost in the shuffle. Happily, it's moving to July; in nine months we get to see the next NYMF from July 9-July 29, which is the right decision for this event which has already showcased some 300 musicals during its lifetime. Now on to the shows happening right now.

### ENNIO: THE LIVING PAPER CARTOON \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\* 47TH STREET THEATRE

For decades, drag queens have dressed up as superstars and lip-synced to hit songs. [Ennio Marchetto](#) has come up with a genuinely fresh twist on this routine. He uses cardboard cut-outs that bend and fold and wrap around to appear in the garb of one star and then magically transform into another and another. His show is a cavalcade of pop songs ranging from old gems to current pop hits, usually heard in snatches as [Ennio](#) displays one amusing prop/outfit after another. Sometimes the transitions are pointed (Bono of

U2 turns into Spiderman and starts singing about money), sometimes they are funny on some intuitive level (Eminem segues into Gloria Gaynor belting out "I Will Survive") and sometimes they're nonsensical (Cher turns into C3PO from *Star Wars*).

It's an amusing conceit done as well as it can be done. Ella Fitzgerald duets with Louis Armstrong, Celine Dion appears on the Titanic, Gene Kelly dances to "Singin' In The Rain" and so on. After a few minutes you start to anticipate his next move. When Ennio starts to pin up cardboard onto the side of his head, you think, "Ah ha! A nun! Will it be The Sound Of Music? The Flying Nun? Or --" and before you can finish your thought he's The Singing Nun doing "Dominique."

But after 15 or so minutes, you've seen all his tricks. When Diana Ross is joined by the Supremes (fold-out profiles that appear on Ennio's shoulder), it's amusing. When the same technique is used later in the show to display the Three Tenors, the *deja vu* sets in.

Ennio maintains a strong focus throughout the show, channeling the personalities and the whipsaw changes nicely. But he was born too late. This act would have killed on Ed Sullivan's show 50 years ago. And it's perfect for vaudeville -- imagine Ennio coming out for brief bursts of about 5-7 minutes length three times during a night. Never too much at once, and not so much that you get bored. He could have toured the country for years and years, always adding in new characters and keeping in mind which routine he did in which city. Indeed, he's appeared at benefits and galas around the world to great success. But all at once, in a 70 minute show, it simply outstays its welcome. Cartoons are meant to be brief.

**KISSLESS** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

### **THEATRE AT ST. CLEMENT'S**

*Kissless* is a high school musical with a clever subtitle ("Oh. My. Goth."), a too earnest message and a young, fresh-faced cast that actually looks like high school students. But good intentions and eager kids can't make up for a confused, messy book and weak, pedestrian songs by Chance McClain.

The main storyline involves loner Summer Stokely (Teresa Zimmermann, the best voice in a vocally challenged show) and Derek West (Tyler Galindo). He's the unhappy jock son of a pushy dad who is also the coach at his school. Summer is unexpectedly forced to stay at Derek's home for half of vacation and rather than just bemoaning his fate to his buddies, Derek bizarrely decides he has to hide this fact from his friends all summer long.

Needless to say, the two of them argue and bicker and fight and soon find they have a lot in common. His friends discover Derek's shameful secret and shun him. He turns his back on Summer and she feels rejected. OK, all quite familiar.

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But Summer is rejected for being one of the goths, even though she's not a goth (they're trying to recruit her). There's also a decades-old pact between the hicks and the geeks which calls for a truce during the summer, a rather convoluted idea that is introduced and mostly forgotten. The goths also seem to practice magic and yearn to have Summer join their group. Meanwhile, Summer goes to a therapist and casually mentions to Derek that she has a defective heart, which she clutches at during moments of high stress. Uh oh.

Above all, the show is called *Kissless*, which is also the opening number. Yet romantic or even sexual desire doesn't seem to be a driving force for much of anyone, despite very brief glimpses that a geek and a hick are secretly dating, just like our jock hero and his semi-goth gal. Whatever. The pressures of cliques and parents are first and foremost. Then come video games and having fun. Getting kissed is way down the list of priorities for these kids.

This wouldn't matter much if the songs were good. But there's barely a strong melody in the bunch and the lyrics ramble on, with one tune barely distinguishable from the next. Most of the cast are not strong singers, with the exception of Zimmermann and Derek's parents (played by Cameron Worthen and especially Megan Blackmon), who have fun with the comic number "My Son." Galindo and Zimmermann have a believable rapport and their acting is what makes the show passably fun. Until the ending....

#### SPOILER ALERT

It's hardly a surprise. When you're told the heroine has a weak heart in the first act, you can be darn certain she's at least going to have a medical scare before the show is over. However, Summer actually dies -- a scene so confusingly staged that because she was at an emotional low point I at first didn't realize she was dead and then assumed she had committed suicide. Happily the therapist Dr. Leonardo Spinks (an amusing turn by Tyce Green) is there to literally step to the front of the stage and spell out what just happened. Not a good sign when you have a character die on stage and then must explain it to the audience. This attempt to give a light, silly show some weight is thoroughly unearned and spoils whatever modest diversion *Kissless* might have provided.

#### END OF SPOILER

The large, eager to please cast is awkwardly handled by co-directors Sam Brown & Ilich Guardiola. It feels more like traffic control than direction on the big numbers. If it were a show put on by the kids at your local high school, you'd applaud their energy and ambition. But as a show written by adults with higher goals, it needs to be held back for remedial education.

**CRAZY, JUST LIKE ME** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**TBG ARTS CENTER**

This is exactly why you go to [NYMF](#): to see a show with a talented cast, strong direction and a promising composer. I might have given it just a tick under three stars, but you want to encourage everyone involved as much as possible after a show like this, so three stars it is.

Simon (Andy Mientus) and Mike (a burly, funny Andrew Kober) have been best friends since forever. Simon is a little uptight and Mike is a guy's guy but they're ideal roommates and pals. Simon feels a little frustrated because Mike has a steady girlfriend. Maybe he's jealous but Simon just says that everyone around him seems to be growing up and getting on with their lives. Throw in the fact that Simon is awfully cute and yet this guy in his mid-twenties hasn't had a date in more than three years (!) and



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musical theater eyebrows will be raised. Hmm.

When Mike's girlfriend Lauren (Lexie Papedo) sets Simon up on a blind date with a gay man (Mike Russo as the confusingly named Stacey), all hell breaks loose. Simon is talked into therapy, discovers he's gay and then rashly decides he's in love with Mike. Mike and Lauren after months of dating bliss finally have a knock-down drag-out fight. Will Mike ask Lauren to marry him? Will Simon come out to his family and friends? Will Simon spoil his friendship with Mike by rashly declaring his love? Does Simon really love Mike? Hey, they told you they were crazy.

Let's start with the good news (and there's a lot of it). Director Stephen Agosto has melded this cast into a genuine ensemble. You immediately believe these two men are best friends, that Lauren is a good match for Mike -- heck, you believe just about everything they throw at you, including Simon's amusingly sudden realization that he's gay. The book by [Drew Gasparini](#) and Louis Sacco (who plays Simon's therapist) has some very strong jokes and well-defined characters. Gasparini also wrote the songs and the score. He's especially strong on tuneful, humorous numbers that encourage a conversational style of singing and quite a few do clever things with rhythm, stopping and starting a number and the like that work very well. Gasparini is on less solid ground when going for more serious, emotional moments but his work overall is good to you-bet-he-can-do-even-better. The show gets off to a strong start with the title tune and the goofy "Funky Fried Piece Of Man Meat," but slows down later as the drama takes over.

Kober bursts with confidence, establishing his mellow but he-man persona (the sort of guy who plays video games but can also give his pal a bear hug) with the assurance of a star. He's ready for a Judd Apatow film or a smart sitcom right now. Papedo is an excellent foil. Sacco is a little too consciously nutty and offbeat as the therapist Dr. Headman; a little wackiness goes a long way. And Russo has a character close to stereotype though he manages to pull back and show a more nuanced side at one or two key moments.

The book, while consistently funny, falters here and there. Simon hasn't been on a date in three years? Well, okay, though it's hard to believe no one has suggested he was gay before. If Mike has been dating Lauren long enough for him to be thinking of taking the next step, it's hard to believe that he doesn't realize her best friend Stacey is a gay man AND that she just assumes Simon is gay without saying something. That's a lot of unspoken assumptions. But those are bumps in the road of a show that flies by on charm.

Above all, it has Andy Mientus as Simon. He was a standout last year at [NYMF](#) with *Shine!* That was a not terribly successful musical based on the Horatio Alger stories, but Mientus struck just the right note as the heroic young lad working his way up to success with pluck and good intentions. Here he tackles a far more complex character -- one that could be hard to swallow or even kind of sad -- and makes him utterly winning. Mientus has the best voice of the bunch and the acting chops to make Simon the beating heart of this show. (He'd be perfect as Bobby in *Company*, a somewhat similar-themed if more serious musical.) Funny, sexy, confused, wistful, charming, Mientus captures Simon's vulnerability and makes it adorable.

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You're lucky if a show features just one very promising element. *Crazy, Just Like Me* has a composer to keep on eye on, a director who has done good work, a strong cast (especially the funny Kober) and a lead performance that marks Mientus as one to watch as well.

#### The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four star scale)

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#### NEW YORK MUSICAL THEATRE FESTIVAL 2011

[Crazy, Just Like Me](#) \*\*\*

[Ennio: The Living Paper Cartoon](#) \*\* 1/2

[F---ing Hipsters](#) \*\*

[Kissless](#) \* 1/2

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[Time Between Us](#) \* 1/2

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**Note:** Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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