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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

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Here's a roundup of my theater-going for the past week covering all the new shows. I see *The Whipping Man* this weekend but had to miss AR Gurney's latest *Black Tie* because of an emergency root canal! I'd rather see the worst show in the world than have an emergency root canal; missing a new Gurney just adds to the pain. At the bottom you'll find links to all my reviews from the current 2010/2011 season. But on with the theater!

- NIXON IN CHINA** *** 1/2 out of ****
- GRUESOME PLAYGROUND INJURIES** ***
- BLOOD FROM A STONE** ** 1/2
- THE NEW YORK IDEA** **
- THE MILK TRAIN DOESN'T STOP HERE ANYMORE** *

THE ROAD TO QATAR *

NIXON IN CHINA *** 1/2 out of ****
[Metropolitan Opera](#)

I'm not well-versed in classical opera but I do have a pretty good handle on contemporary composers. I love the generation that produced Philip Glass, Steve Reich, John Adams and others and have seen many of their works. But though I've heard *Nixon In China*, I'd never seen it staged before. Catching its premiere at the Met -- with Adams himself as conductor, no less -- was a thrill. The piece might be 24 years old, but it still feels shockingly modern on the stage where I'm used to seeing Puccini and Wagner. You know it's still revolutionary or at least fun when Chairman Mao's wife says, "Let's show these

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motherf**ers how to dance!" But the general mood is not raucous or punk or edgy, it's stirring and even ritualistic, all presented in a faithful production overseen by director Peter Sellars. The operas of Glass and Adams and the others pare down character and plot to their totemic essentials. The first Act shows Nixon landing his plane in China for that historic visit, meeting Mao and then being toasted at dinner. It moves with solemnity -- the peasants lined up facing the audience, repeating the lines "The people are the heroes now/Behemoths pull the peasants' plow" until it moves from prayer to prophecy to proclamation.

My host talked about the characters at the break. Didn't Nixon seem sort of shallow? But I wasn't thinking of character at all; it felt more like a mass, with the sight of Air Force One simply floating down out of the clouds akin to a visitation. But characters soon emerged. Nixon (sung as always by James Maddalena) was alive with history, aware always of the import of the visit. Maddalena embodies him perfectly, managing to sing somehow with a sense of Nixon himself, who it's hard to imagine ever singing at all much less an aria. Pat Nixon blossomed in the second act where Janis Kelly enlivened the rote visit by a First Lady to a factory and a school with personal memories and a quick but not indulgent thought for the easier life that might have been out of the spotlight. And surely another first for the Met, as the chorus sang "Pig pig pig pig pig pig!" while Nixon was introduced to a sow.

Here's director Peter Sellars discussing *Nixon In China* at the Asia Society.

Almost stealing the spotlight was Kathleen Kim, who fiercely embodied the role of Mao's wife. Her didactic play about a poor peasant girl went adrift for me at first, with Pat Nixon breaking out of character to actually get caught up in the woes of the actress as if the scenes were actually happening. But it paid off when the story exploded into the Cultural Revolution and all its horrors with denunciations and public shaming and chaos, all overseen by a grimly smiling Madame Mao repeating over and over "I speak according to the book!" Thrilling. (I can't embed their video but [you can check it out here.](#))

Russell Braun also did nicely (despite having his arm in a sling), giving a plaintive tone to the gentle finale "I Am Old And Cannot Sleep," with Robert Brubaker a wily if frail Mao and Richard Paul Fink OK in the thankless, underdeveloped role of Kissinger.

Nixon In China entered the repertoire long ago but the Met has performed it at a fortuitous time in a solid, sometimes gorgeous production. Mao raised the weak over the strong? Well, history will decide but it's exciting to see it happen again in Egypt and across the Middle East, though revolution doesn't always mean a happy ending. John Adams' opera has mined an historic moment with a marvelous balance of riveting images, stirring music and enough humanity for the major characters to give a sense of the real people who rode these titanic changes into the spotlight. The Met hasn't given *Nixon In China* its stamp of approval so much as bowed to the inevitable with commendable style.

GRUESOME PLAYGROUND INJURIES *** out of **** Second Stage Theatre

I felt a pleasant buzz when entering Second Stage. The audience seemed filled with friends of the talent and theater cognoscenti and no wonder: playwright Rajiv Joseph had been shortlisted for the Pulitzer for his new work *Bengal Tiger At The Bagdad Zoo*. That is coming to Broadway starting March 11 with Robin Williams. And Second Stage is practically Joseph's New York home, having staged two previous plays. What did he have up his sleeve?

The answer is a technically assured, confident, intriguing work that is intellectually playful if not quite



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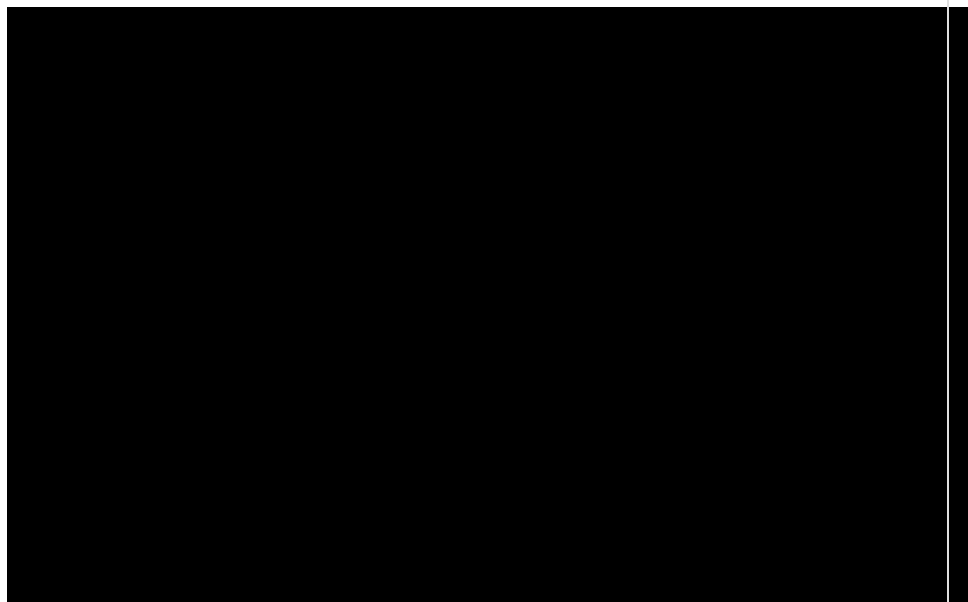
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successful on an emotional level. *Gruesome Playground Injuries* does however make one thing clear to someone like me who hasn't seen his work before: Joseph is talented and knows what he is doing.



He's certainly blessed with an excellent production. The set by Neil Patel is coolly elegant with small pools of water lining each side of the stage, shelves and drawers built into the wall on each side and a stark white look that sets the right tone of modernism. Scott Ellis directs with finesse and the two actors - Pablo Schreiber and Jennifer Carpenter of TV's *Dexter* -- are fully invested.

The story is amusingly perverse. We first meet two kids at 8 years old -- a sullen girl and a weirdly mischievous boy who is accident-prone to say the least. Best friends for life? Future lovers? Sketched in with precision and acted beautifully (both Schreiber and Carpenter are especially good as adolescents), both Kayleen and Doug come to life quickly. Then we jump forward to when they're 23 and then back to the age of 13 and forward and backward again.

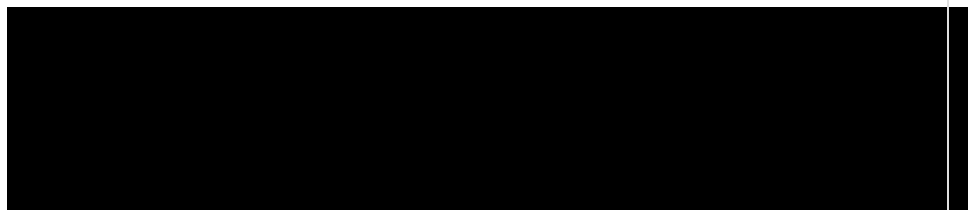
Doug is forever poking out an eye, throwing up, getting increasingly injured while Kayleen is both fascinated and grossed out by his misadventures. But she's also the only one who can cure him: Kayleen has to lay her hands on Doug for him to get better. She can even bring him back from a coma or -- who knows -- the dead. Schreiber is always good and Carpenter a happy find. I only thought about the foul-mouthed Debra Morgan during a few brief moments when Kayleen cursed. Otherwise, she proved a confident stage actor with chops far beyond the role she has deserved an Emmy for these past few years.

Naturally, we wonder when these soul mates are going to get together and the play is weakest at getting over this hurdle. They're meant for each other but rather unsatisfyingly kept apart. One reaches out but the other pushes them away. Then the other reaches out, but too late. It's the major flaw in an otherwise solid work that mines childhood and a shared bucket of vomit (one of the show's sweeter moments) to show two people bonding over pain.

BLOOD FROM A STONE ** 1/2 out of ****

The New Group at Acorn/Theatre Row

Like Rajiv Joseph's *Gruesome Playground Injuries*, Tommy Nohilly's play *Blood From A Stone* has all the hallmarks of a young playwright. Where Joseph's work is almost a scientific diagram of a piece (leaping forward and backward in time by ten and five years, upping the ante on injuries at every stage), Nohilly's is in the vein of a young artist pouring out everything he has into a sprawling family saga filled with recriminations and violence and buried pride and anger and touches of grace. It's messy and saggy and overstuffed with plot to the point of overkill. But it's easy to see why actors the calibre of Ethan Hawke were drawn to it. Here's a [Broadway.com](#) interview of principal players.



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Travis (Hawke) is the relatively sober center of his family which comes together around Christmas. More accurately, they meet on the battlefield of their dilapidated family home at Christmas, like the North and the South at a leaking, falling down Gettysburg. Mom Margaret (Ann Dowd) relentlessly runs down Travis's dad at every opportunity. Dad (Gordon Clapp of NYPD Blue) tries to get Travis to meet his mistress and shows flashes of the anger that made all his kids fear him. Sarah (Natasha Lyonne) is the sane sister Sarah who tries to stay out of the way, Matt (an excellent Thomas Guiry) is the screw-up in trouble with gangs and over his head in debt), and Yvette (Daphne Rubin-Vega, looking fit and my gosh don't she know it) is the married neighbor who still has a thing for Travis.

Needless to say, arguments will be had, revelations will be revealed and Travis (who dreams of escaping on a cross-country trip that might just become permanent) will be sucked back into the family as surely as Michael Corleone.

The house, which literally has ceiling tiles falling down during rainstorms (note: don't sit in the front row) is all too clearly a symbol for the family itself. And despite patches of sterling dialogue and yeoman work by the cast, most of the characters remain one-note. Mom is just a harridan -- you want to empathize with her, but she's so viciously nasty you start to wonder exactly who's fault the faded marriage is in the end. Clapp is too genial as the dad -- he just doesn't seem that bad and the idea of him as a menacing figure who beat the kids in the past just never comes across -- he's a good actor, but perhaps miscast here. Lyonee and Rubin-Vega are solid, especially since their main scenes are with Hawke, who delivers another comic but penetrating turn as the kid who just tries to keep everyone on an even keel. Guiry is especially good as his brother, the sort of loser who even lies about things that he doesn't need to lie about because he doesn't know any other way.

If the show had ended at the first act, it would have been better, having achieved a sense of these people and their frayed lives. But the second act was so jam-packed with plot twists that it almost became amusing instead of tragic. Nonetheless, you walk away thinking that Nohilly has gotten this saga out of his system and with another play or two (and a firmer editor behind him) might just have a strong distinctive voice waiting to emerge.

THE NEW YORK IDEA ** out of ****
 Atlantic Theater Company at Lucille Lortel

I've never read or seen the original hit play by Langdon Mitchell. But having seen David Auburn (writer of Proof) rework that play The New York Idea into a new production, I haven't the foggiest idea what attracted him to it. The original opened in 1906 but this new version is neither fish nor fowl. It's not penetrating enough to refurbish The New York Idea as a caustic look at the changing mores surrounding marriage and gender. Nor is it funny enough to make Mitchell's play a comic gem. It's just...muddled.

Cynthia (Jaime Ray Newman) is the model of a modern woman. She's boisterous and alive and knows horse flesh as well as any man. Her ex-husband John (Jeremy Shamos) fights with her so much you just know they're meant to get back together. Instead, Cynthia is about to be married to the nice but stolid and priggish judge Philip Philmore (Michael Countryman). He loves Cynthia and rather expects her to be a good little wife. Running off to the race track -- on their wedding day, no less -- is sure to discombobulate him. Then there's his ex-wife Vida (Francesca Faridany), a sexy modern woman in her own way and nobody's fool; how they got together in the first place is a mystery. She'd take him back or settle for the wealthy English aristocrat looking for an American spouse.

Confused? Don't be. It's the usual roundelay of friction and fun, though not terribly sparkling. Newman gets to the heart of the play as a very modern young woman; she's not anachronistic in the least since

Katharine Hepburn would be embodying such a creature in the decades to come and other examples abound. Newman strikes the right balance between humor and drama and her scenes with her ex-husband have a welcome weight to them, making clear that something emotional truly is at stake. Otherwise, the show is a mess, with some of the stuff relatives performing as if they're in a broad comedy and others taking it all too seriously. In a minor turn, John Keating is very funny and mines all the humor he can as a handy man with the horses taking full advantage of America and its modern ways. Auburn doesn't take full advantage of Mitchell's play and whatever promise he saw in it, but for moments when Newman and Keating are on stage, you can see what he had in mind.

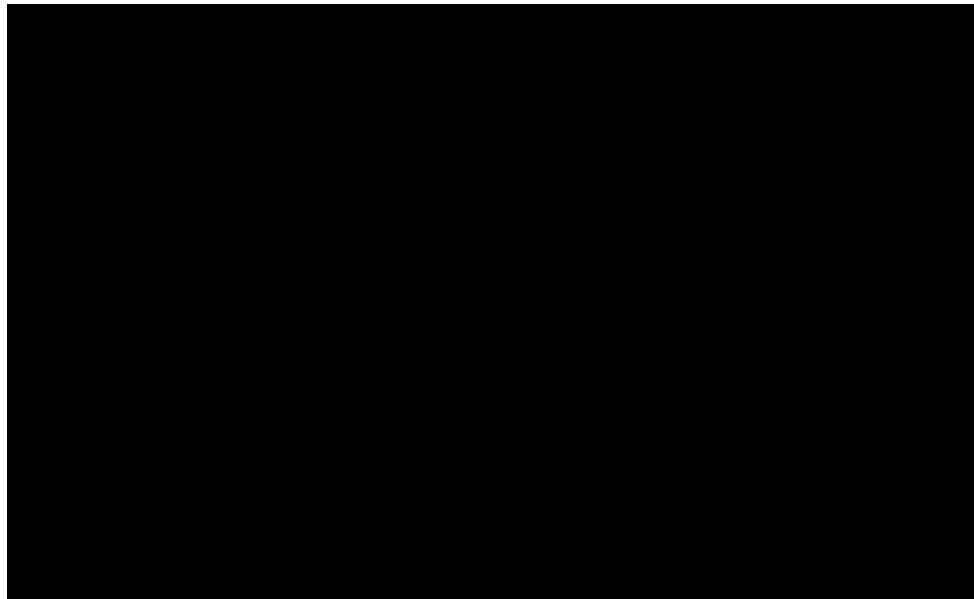
THE MILK TRAIN DOESN'T STOP HERE ANYMORE * out of ****

Roundabout at Laura Pels Theatre

The Roundabout has a great success on its hand with its first Oscar Wilde production -- *The Importance Of Being Earnest* -- which is sure to be remembered come Tony time at the very least for Brian Bedford. That met the challenge of staging a classic and giving it new life. Here they face the opposite challenge of mounting a flawed work by Tennessee Williams and hopefully revealing a mature work of substance. No such luck, I'm afraid.

You know you're in trouble from the very start: the set has the imposing look of a Wagnerian opera and swallows the action up. The story is about an aging grand dame named Flora Goforth (Olympia Dukakis) -- a much married woman who has lived life to the fullest and is now dictating her memoirs about high society a la Truman Capote's *Unfinished Prayers* to a tired female assistant named Blackie (Maggie Lacey). Flora is slowly dying but not so near death that she can't appreciate the sight of a young man. Unfortunately, the man is a not so young Christopher Flanders (Darren Pettie) and his nickname -- the Angel of Death -- hints at the man's propensity for visiting elderly and wealthy women just as they're about to die.

Flora is perched high on a cliff above the sea in Italy, living in seedy isolation. And if the sound of the surf crashing against the rocks isn't doom-laden enough, Flanders is sure to echo the sound by walking to center stage and intoning "Boom!" every once in a while in a meaningful manner. Flanders will flirt with Blackie, Flora will flirt and humiliate and toy with Flanders and Blackie and it will all amount to very little.



Tennessee Williams is clearly gleaning what he can from well-plowed ground with this tale of an aging female creature and a compromised boy toy. Dukakis goes for broke here -- what else can one do when the piece itself is lacking? She bites into her lines, turning the name of "Blackie!" almost into a laugh just by how she barks it out. Dukakis is fearless in a way, certainly more fearless than Williams who had nothing to say but wrote the play anyway. Pettie, so good as the cigarette exec on *Mad Men*, has a confused role to play -- a guy who angrily denies he hurt one old woman but is just as eager to provide a Kevorkian-like push when needed. He can't make sense of it. Even more lost is Lacey as poor Blackie. She has no idea who her character is, but then neither did Tennessee.

The set as mentioned is ugly and cavernous, with the looming cliffs dwarfing Flora's ugly bedroom where she dictates her memoirs over loudspeakers. Director Michael Wilson has a real love for Williams and has directed many of his plays before. But he's unable to get anyone -- not the sets or costumes or

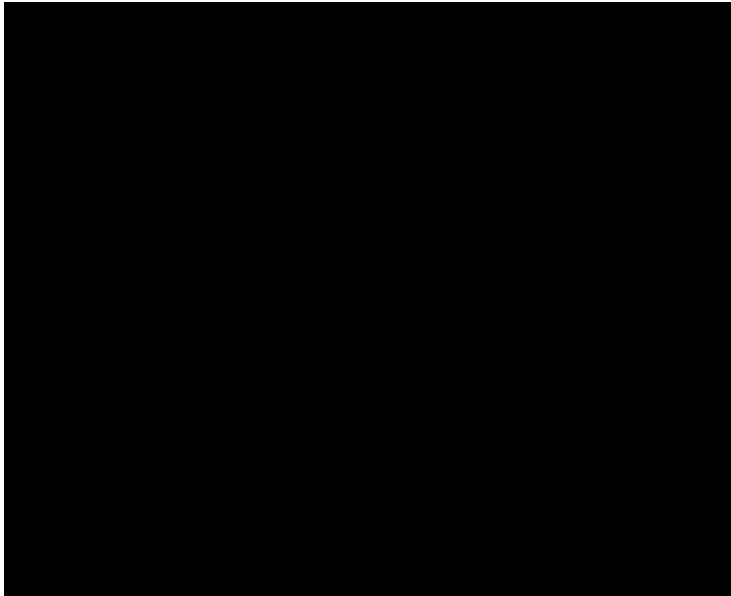
performances -- on the same page here. The result is a mess where audience members cough uncomfortably and greedily latch onto any humor Dukakis can offer them. It's not much, but they know a drowning woman when they see one and reward her with the applause she deserves far more than the play or this production.

THE ROAD TO QATAR * out of ****

The York Theatre Company at St. Peter's

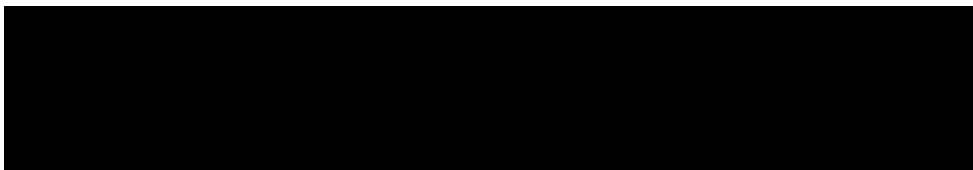
Theater veterans Stephen Cole and David Krane have a great dinner party story: one day, out of the blue, these two men (who didn't know each other) were contacted by a group in Dubai that offered them a pot of money and unlimited resources to head to the Middle East and mount a Broadway-quality show in Qatar. But they had six weeks to write it and must work in elements like the desert, the Gulf, traveling circus performers (hey, they were available) and even Olympian Carl Lewis (hey, he's been available for years).


Once they realized it wasn't some scam, they plunged into the adventure with good spirits. Nuttiness ensued, though not enough nuttiness I'm sad to say to make this amusing anecdote worthy of a musical about the making of the musical they made, *Aspire*. Obviously, the reference here is to the Road To... movies starring Bing Crosby and Bob Hope. But this musical isn't a satire nor is it filled with topical gags. The two men -- Michael (James Beaman) and Jeffrey (Keith Gerchak) -- aren't polar opposites, for example. Where Hope and Crosby played off each other beautifully, these guys are essentially the same. One is a little more pessimistic and the other a little more upbeat, but as one song says, they're basically two short Jews and quite similar. From such pairings, great comedy teams are not made.



Then, their adventure isn't so adventurous. It's kind of amusing if you work in theater to hear all the bizarre demands made. But no real stumbling blocks appear. In fact, they're given an absurdly short six weeks to write a musical from scratch...and deliver it in five. The songs we hear aren't awful or good, just generic. The cast mugs about and does their best, but with little conflict and lines like "The show ain't over till the camel sings" what can you do? Even Hope & Crosby would struggle with that. The politics of it all seem uninteresting to them (despite a brief scene wondering how their hosts would feel if they knew our heroes were Jews). But staging a musical in Qatar is like putting on a show in Sun City during apartheid-era South Africa.

But forget the possibilities. Why aren't the leads called Stephen and David? We know it's them. And don't they realize how absurd it all was? Maybe not. In a 20 minute online documentary about the making of *Aspire* that they shot, you get crazy glimpses of the actual production (including Carl Lewis high up in the air singing along) and the two guys who seem happy as clams and enthusiastic about what they're doing and in the usual pr mode of putting a best face on things even feel like they're making a contribution to peace in the Middle East.





Maybe it wasn't so surreal or awful to them after all, even if the check apparently wasn't in the mail.
Maybe if they'd had a worse time, we'd have a better musical.

THE 2010-2011 THEATER SEASON (ratings on a four star system)

Blood From A Stone ** 1/2
Devil Boys From Beyond **
Driving Miss Daisy **
Elf *
Elling **
A Free Man Of Color ** 1/2
Gatz ***
The Grand Manner **
The Great Game ***
Gruesome Playground Injuries ***
The Importance Of Being Earnest ** 1/2
The Interminable Suicide Of Gregory Church *** 1/2
John Gabriel Borkman * 1/2
La Bete ** 1/2
Les Miserables ***
Lombardi **
The Merchant Of Venice *** 1/2
Middletown ***
The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore *
Mistakes Were Made ** 1/2
Nixon In China *** 1/2
Other Desert Cities **
Our Town with Helen Hunt ***
The Pee-wee Herman Show ***
The Road To Qatar *
The Scottsboro Boys ****
Wings **
Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown **

AT THE NEW YORK MUSICAL FESTIVAL

Blood Ties ***
Fellowship * 1/2
Fingers and Toes ** 1/2
Frog Kiss *** 1/2
The Great Unknown ** 1/2
Nighttime Traffic **
Our Country *
PopArt *
Shine! The Horatio Alger Musical ** 1/2
Show Choir **
Tess: The New Musical **
Trav'lin' ***
Without You *** 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.

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