

# Theater: Not Enough "Tristan & Yseult;" Never Enough Lypsinka!

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**TRISTAN & YSEULT** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**LYPSKINA! THE BOXED SET** \*\*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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**ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE**

I had a great first date with [the Kneehigh theatre company](#). It was their wildly popular adaptation of that veddy British romance Brief Encounter. Kneehigh's spin on it was immersive and fun from the start. That was followed by a second date called [The Wild Bride](#), a show not nearly as good but you remember how much fun you had on the first date and would regret not giving it another go.

Well, here's the all important third date and Tristan & Yseult is a disappointment. It's a pleasant enough evening out if you aren't looking for a commitment. But I want to fall in love with a theater company the way I fell in love with Cheek By Jowl or ERS and Kneehigh is making that very difficult. Maybe we should just be friends?

How else to feel about a troupe that is too clever by half? They clearly spent so much time working on theatrical flourishes and little bits of business and "what if's" (as in "what if we did this?" or "what if we tried that?") that they lost track of the fabled romance at its heart. Tristan & Yseult is of course a classic tale, an earlier spin on the King Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere love triangle. A French knight wins the affection and trust of a king, is sent off to bring home a bride and in doing so falls madly in love with her (and she with him). Tragedy ensues.

The story has many variations: sometimes the king sends the lovers away with his resigned blessing; other times he has them killed. But tears will flow, whether you're reading a medieval poem's version or watching Wagner's opera, which includes some of the most romantic and stirring music in history. Kneehigh -- no fools they -- wisely include snippets of Wagner from the start and go all in for the finale. You can't help feeling a little stirred though it's all reflected glory.

It certainly helps to have a sense of the story going in because adapter and director Emma Rice along with writers Carl Grose and Anna Maria Murphy spent most of the time filling the show with bits of business. For example, they stage it at a Club for the Unloved and a band performs covers of pop songs before the show begins and during the interval. It's enjoyable but a retread of what they did more charmingly on Brief Encounter. (Of course, T&Y came first for this company. I'm only seeing it now upon its NYC premiere. Perhaps if I'd seen it first, I'd say Brief Encounter was wearing out the idea. In any case, it may indicate a limited bag of tricks.)

A troupe of sad fools -- all of them not so proud members of the Unloved -- wear anoraks and dorky head gear, watching the story unfold, offering a hand with the set or simply gobbling up popcorn during key emotional moments. They are consistently amusing but it's a bit like admiring the frame around an old painting rather than the painting itself.

I'll remember a fair amount of this T&Y: the maid (Niall Ashdown) who substitutes for Yseult in the marriage bed and pines for romance of her own, the amusingly naff covers, the king's once favored knight Frocin (the handsome and casually magnetic Damon Daunno) and his toast at the wedding and so on. But Tristan? Yseult?

The lovers at the heart of this story? They barely register, mostly because they're given so little to do. I wasn't surprised to see Hannah Vassallo has many credits as a dancer; she moves well but is less confident with the text. Dominic Marsh is a straightforward, unremarkable Tristan and the journey they go on isn't terribly clear. (Does the love potion merely accentuate their passion or make them think what was just lust was in fact something more? We don't really care.)

And let's not go overboard praising the details in this overly illuminated manuscript. Many bits of business don't in fact work. The scene on the ship with Yseult and the maid is labored and drawn out. The circus-like scene where our lovers fly in the air with their passion doesn't take one's breath away. The comedy where Frocin perches in the air (again with those high-wire ropes the show is enamored of) just to spy on the lovers is also drawn out and not terribly funny. And so on, I fear, until like any date gone off the rails you are furtively checking your watch, wondering when it won't be rude to say you have to work in the morning.

The cast is generally too enthusiastic and too talented to make the night a genuine drag. It just doesn't add up to much. Of course, the finale is moving but that's Wagner for you: play highlights from his masterworks and almost any fool will begin to tear up. Bugs Bunny had a field day playing around with opera, but I can remember every silly detail of What's Opera, Doc? and the emotions gleefully at play. Tristan & Yseult faded from memory as soon as I exited the theater and cued up a dating app to see if anyone else was feeling unsatisfied and looking for true love. Or at least another first date that would leave you with hope.

**LYPSKINA! THE BOXED SET** \*\*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**TWEED THEATER WORKS AT THE CONNELLY THEATER**

Speaking of relationships, where has [Lypsinka](#) been all my life? She aka John Epperson has turned one of the most uncreative acts imaginable -- lip syncing along to a prerecorded song -- into high art. It's happened before. Creator Dennis Potter used lip syncing to remarkable effect in his TV musicals Pennies From Heaven and The Singing Detective. And of course drag queens have lip synced for generations. But no matter how well coiffed they are, no matter how precise their pronunciation and dead-on their mannerisms, that's just imitation, which is why the most talented go on to create their own personas. Imitation is the lowest form of stand-up though some people have made a career out of it (Rich Little) or more often used it as a springboard to something better.

But [Lypsinka](#) -- as aficionados have known for a long time -- is on an entirely different level. First, she creates a sound collage akin to the most brilliant sampling to be found in hip-hop music. Most of those artists find a particular bit of percussion or maybe a five second bit of music they slice up and loop over and over. [Lypsinka](#) has created a 70 minute collage that combines audio pulled from every possible source into an evening's entertainment. You'll hear clips from movies and tv shows and interviews and pop songs and live concerts, especially the between-song chatter that can be wonderfully cheesy. ("Good evening ladies and gentlemen. You know songs come and go but I love the classics....")

That sounds simple enough, but keep in mind: almost none of the songs are played in full and bits of dialogue are strung together in an artful manner that creates comedy and drama and bizarre juxtapositions and it stretches out for 70 minutes. I say stretches and that's what you fear when the show begins. How can he keep this up? And yet he does: with extended bravura passages like a series of phone calls that interrupt certain numbers or the lip-syncing to a jokingly drunken version of "The 12 Days Of Christmas" that would be a show-stopper all on its own."

Doing it for five or ten minutes would be daunting and even then most people would play out an entire song just to fill up the time. Doing this for 70 minutes is a high-wire act of assembly. I would gladly listen to just the audio collage Epperson has created and have a grand old time. Heck, I would gladly strap a tape recorder to my chest and sneak it into the theater just so I could tape the "soundtrack" and break down exactly what [Lypsinka](#) is doing here. (Rather, I would if I didn't fear [Lypsinka's](#) wrath when she discovered my act of adoring but unacceptable

piracy.)

But that's just the start of what [Lypsinka](#) accomplishes. She performs live onstage this entire sound collage. Every snatch of dialogue, every bit of music, every off-hand stage patter, every grunt and sigh and scream is recreated by Lypsinka. The level of artifice, the meta-ness of it all becomes deliciously dizzying. Sometimes Epperson as [Lypsinka](#) is doing it all to a "t," every hand gesture pure theater, every eye roll completely in character. Other times he's undercutting the obviously insincere chatter. During a particularly manic song his hands might take on a life of their own and you can see him performing -- that is, lip syncing -- along with the song while his eyes warily stay focused on hands that seem to have mischief in mind.

He flirts and jokes with the audience. He wears a dazzling number of gowns. He laughs and struts and pleads and sashays without pause, all of course in a highly choreographed and precise manner that feels both fluid and in-the-moment yet must be as tightly timed as any farce where one door slammed too soon could throw the whole night off. Surely there are moments where he can "catch up" that we don't spot, pauses where he can vamp or play off the crowd. But I didn't spot them.

It's silly, it's funny, it's beautifully performed and it is entirely unique. Has anyone ever filmed it? To hell with the seemingly impossible clearances that would make it daunting to ever release the show on film, even if it is all fair use. He really should be captured in concert for posterity. And what exactly does [Lypsinka](#) pull from to create these collages? Oh I spotted some classics like of course Mommie Dearest. You get Joan Crawford and Bette Davis and countless others. But the vast majority of clips remained a mystery to me and the desire to "spot the source" remained but was never the point. You're not patting yourself on the shoulder for recognizing this or that old movie clip or classic cabaret number; you're just marveling at a one of a kind talent.

Epperson could seemingly pull this off for many years to come. But why take that chance? Neophytes should surely begin with his greatest hits show *Boxed Set*. It's the centerpiece in this trilogy of plays he's mounted. But now I'm intrigued by the absinthe-like delirium of *The Passion Of The Crawford* (in which he recreates an entire interview with that icon) and the life in this biz we call show dubbed *John Epperson: Show Trash*, the story of this rare flower and how he came to be. The technical credits are flawless and the team behind him (led by director Kevin Malony on *Boxed Set*) deserve high praise. But is there any question that [Lypsinka](#) is in charge? No, there is not.

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[Rodney King](#) \*\*\*

[Hard Times](#) \*\* 1/2

[Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead](#) \*\*

[I Could Say More](#) \*

[The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner](#) \*\*

[Machinal](#) \*\*\*

[Outside Mullingar](#) \*\*\*

[A Man's A Man](#) \* 1/2

[The Tribute Artist](#) \*\* 1/2

[Transport](#) \*\*

[Prince Igor at the Met](#) \*\*

[The Bridges Of Madison County](#) \*\* 1/2

[Kung Fu \(at Signature\)](#) \*\*

[Stage Kiss](#) \*\*\*

[Satchmo At The Waldorf](#) \*\*\*

[Antony and Cleopatra at the Public](#) \*\*