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## Theater: Not Missing "Saigon," William Inge No "Picnic," "Broadway By The Year" Stumble

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MISS SAIGON \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

PICNIC/COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

BROADWAY BY THE YEAR: THE 1940S \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

MISS SAIGON \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

BROADWAY THEATRE

We're not used to thinking of one-hit wonders when it comes to Broadway composers, not really. But if anyone fits the bill it may be the team of Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil. To most critics, they're actually no-hit wonders, two guys who got lucky with the "popera" *Les Misérables*, followed it up with *Miss Saigon* (a hit purely on momentum, in their eyes) and then faded from view along with the era of the British mega-musical.

Not to me. I like *Les Miz* (ok, actually I love it). I will happily defend its "sturdy" score and hummable melodies; I will happily sing it, too, given half a chance. It's an audacious and absurd enterprise, sure. But the show was fluidly inventive in its staging, filled with iconic visual moments and boasted great original casts in London and New York. It helps that over the years I've seen increasingly good productions, beginning with a tired bus-and-truck edition lugging itself across the South in the 1980s (which I saw in a massive auditorium seated somewhere in the rafters). Then came the too-soon Broadway revival of 2006 and finally the very good recent revival in 2014. (The less said about the movie, the better.) I also saw Schönberg/Boublil's *Martin Guerre* in two (or perhaps even three?) incarnations in London. It never quite worked but it was interesting and had merit and I could see why they kept trying. As for *Miss Saigon*, I found the cast album so shockingly banal in its lyrics and melody ("we told you," said the naysayers) that I had no interest in seeing during the initial run.

So here I come to the Broadway revival of *Miss Saigon*, quite open to the talents of its creative team despite the fact that none of their shows achieved even the grudging critical respect of that first breakthrough. (Others included *The Pirate Queen* and *Marguerite*. No, me neither.) A retelling of *Madame Butterfly* set during the Vietnam War, *Miss Saigon* is a spectacle from a very particular time and place in musical theater, much like kabuki harkens back to classical performances of of the 1600s in Japan. You know immediately that you're at a Cameron Mackintosh spectacle and the synth-like sound of the keyboards in the orchestra practically announces what year it was when this first came out. Is it good? By no means. But it *is* big and happily boasts a lead actress who with better material might just become a star.

The story is over-heated nonsense, but then so is most opera. A disillusioned G.I. falls hard for a young woman just joining a brothel. Before they can barely say "I love you" she's deflowered (and pregnant!), Saigon falls and he's helicoptered out against his will. Over the next three years, the girl Kim is hounded by the spurned man of an arranged marriage, dancing in a brothel in Bangkok and naively dreaming of the American she believes will rescue her and their son. He's now married but still haunted by her memory. At the finale, a desperate confrontation results in her committing suicide in order to give her child the chance of a better life in America.

This is a little more coherent than the actual storyline on stage, filled as it is with cliches and non-stop *Les Miz*-like action that barely catches its breath. The sense of the creative team rehashing what worked before in *Les Miz* is palpable, from the early song featuring hookers to the comic relief of a cynical presence (in this case, the Engineer) to a big visual flourish at a climactic moment (in *Les Miz*, a plunge from a bridge, here that helicopter). It's pure Cliffs Notes.

In *Les Miz* that condensation didn't matter because the source material was so sprawling. You would need a

*week* of operas just to sketch out the plot of Victor Hugo's doorstop of a novel so of course *Les Miz* felt giddily rushed. In recompense, it offered a carousel of one catchy number after another. But *Madame Butterfly* is a simple heartfelt tale and letting the romance of two people be overwhelmed by spectacle denudes it of power. And the tunes are almost astonishingly bad from start to finish both in words and music and all the spectacle in the world can't hide that. The fact that the great Richard Maltby Jr. teamed with Boublil on the lyrics (and with Michael Mahler chipping in) makes their inept nature and plodding rhymes all the more inexplicable.

Still, spectacle there is, put across by an able cast. The chorus and background singers are impressive from start to finish, whether pole dancing or delivering the infomercial-like bathos of a song about children fathered and abandoned by American soldiers. By all accounts (or rather, the account of my guest who saw the original just as it opened), the direction of Laurence Connor and the staging and choreography of Bob Avian is very much in the spirit of the show as originally conceived, from the repeated over-emphasis of spotlighting key characters on the darkened stage to the elaborate mob scene at the US embassy in Act Two. (I did giggle a bit as our heroine went for a stroll outside the gates, singing her heart out while chaos erupted all around.)

It feels wrong for the actor playing The Engineer to get top billing just because Jonathan Pryce was the most famous name in the first mounting. Jon Jon Briones is less scenery-chewing and more a part of the ensemble, a choice which has its integrity. But when the show needs all the goosing it can get, we're given a smaller, more realistic turn. As a result, the Engineer's big number "The American Dream" felt like an interruption in the action, not a peak. This song appearing just when our heroine is preparing to sacrifice her life felt like a mistake, akin to giving the Thénardiens an eleven o'clock number in *Les Miz*. Ironically, "The American Dream" is easily the most coherent song in the show.

Very much on the plus side (and the reason this show gets two stars instead of one) are two key actors. The handsome, strong-voiced Devin Ilaw is a treat as our heroine's bitter betrothed, Thuy. Given the material at hand, his conviction in the part is all the more impressive; against the odds, Ilaw sings with purpose, commands the stage and creates a character more complex than his evil villain contours might suggest. I look forward to seeing him again; it's a pity he's not available for *Pacific Overtures* at Classic Stage Company.

And above all there's Eva Noblezada, the star of the show who was cast in fairytale fashion. While still in high school, she came to NYC to perform in the annual Jimmy Awards, a showcase of the best high school talent from around the country and an event I've come to love. Noblezada didn't even win, but a producer working on the London revival of *Miss Saigon* saw her doing songs from this show. Before you know it, she's gone from her presumed high school gymnasium to the West End in the same part. Noblezada sings beautifully and gives a forceful, determined air to Kim. You won't find any hint of submissiveness about her here, whatever western prejudice once expected. And yet it's true to the role as conceived and written; Noblezada just maintains a core strength throughout. The actress's dramatic confrontation with her lover's American wife has actual power and emotion, the only point in the show where that was true.

I can't recommend *Miss Saigon* just to see Noblezada (and Ilaw). But it's going to be fascinating to see if the promise she evinces will flower in a better show. Certainly she'll be getting the chance. And if you want to see

the Broadway stars of tomorrow (in her case, it was almost *literally* tomorrow), this year's Jimmy Awards take place on June 26.

PICNIC/COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

## THE GYM AT JUDSON

The theater company Transport Group surely intended to make the case for playwright William Inge, following up their Obie-winning revival of his once acclaimed, now little-seen drama *The Dark At The Top Of The Stairs*. They've tackled two of his three famous (not major) plays in repertory: *Picnic* and *Come Back, Little Sheba*. (The third is the equally problematic *Bus Stop*.) Unfortunately, the case they've made is the opposite of their noble intent, a case for continued neglect of plays that simply don't hold up. Inge's life is terribly tragic, with one of the most acclaimed and successful writers in the world (Hit plays! Bestsellers! Oscars! Pulitzers!) living just long enough to see virtually everything he did become hopelessly out of fashion and committing suicide in despair at 60.

Sadly, everything in this production feels misguided. Inge died with some two dozen un-produced plays and many other works rarely done. Perhaps they *all* feel of a piece but seeing *Picnic* and *Sheba* back to back does neither show any favors. Their bland similarity is emphasized and lessens whatever impact each might have on their own. As always, we are seeing small-town life, for Inge was dubbed the playwright of the Midwest. Adults are trapped in unhappy lives due to going astray sexually when young and now they're watching a new generation of kids make the same tragic mistakes.

Probably seen as bold and sexually frank at the time, *Picnic* believes it is provocative while *Sheba* tosses in alcoholism for good measure. But both dramas are at heart priggish and small-minded. Sex may be alluring but it's also poison. The young heroine in *Picnic* goes for the bad boy while the young heroine in *Sheba* chooses "right," but the message is the same in either. One after the other, *Picnic* and *Sheba* don't evince recurring themes but simply feel like the same story done with a mild twist to make it seem new.

The casting only emphasizes this. In both plays, David T. Patterson is cast as the dangerous bad boy and Rowan Vickers the “good” (or at least wealthy if boring) boy. In *Picnic*, Heather Rae is the quiet neighbor striving to hope for the best for everyone. In *Sheba*, she’s the quiet wife hoping for the best from her alcoholic husband and young female tenant. In *Picnic*, Hannah Elless plays the tomboyish kid with a crush on the sexy drifter Hal, while in *Sheba* she’s graduated to making out with him. While so many characters are hopelessly similar, at the very least the two young men could have switched parts, with the solid and appealing Vickers (dressed to look as nebbishy as possible in both) getting the chance to be lusty in *Sheba* with Patterson clothed to be a boring future husband of means. (Physically Patterson is clearly the slab of beef *Picnic* calls for. But Vickers could certainly pose as a javelin thrower for one scene in *Sheba* and a reference to football simply glossed over.)

The scenic design of Dane Laffrey is the one area that attempts to contrast the two shows. *Picnic* takes place outdoors and the wooden structure set up in the Gym at Judson is angled oddly to keep the audience in an L-shaped pattern along two walls in the corner of the theater. I worried about the sight lines of those on either end but it worked fine and created a modest sense of different spaces. However, in *Sheba* we were inside those wooden walls, enclosing the living room and kitchen as the two main areas with the audience seated in a series of cubbyholes all around the room. This was unfortunate since it seemed like certain moments took place way off to one side or around a little corner and many of the theater-goers had poor views or no views at all for brief periods. It didn’t add much of anything thematically to the experience either, such as prying neighbors or hidden secrets or their trapped existence.

*Picnic* is a melodrama and *Sheba* a potboiler and nothing director Jack Cummings III could do would change that. Still, the casting might have shown more imagination and the pairing of the two deadly similar shows was a mistake from the start. Michael John LaChuisa is a great composer but almost no one has used wordless vocalizing as an accent to a score sound anything but cheesy and he doesn’t end that streak with *Picnic*.

Happily, actors can make hay even with soapy material. John Cariani is one of those dependable actors you damn with faint praise by saying they’re always dependable. But he is! His store owner in *Picnic* and a series of delivery men in *Sheba* are all memorable; the mailman and the milkman in *Sheba* are specific and believable characters you simply accept. Vickers is quite good in two bland roles, adding a hint of feyness early on in *Picnic* to suggest why he’s such a boring option for our heroine. (That’s always a viable choice when dealing with the closeted Inge, who did include two openly gay characters in two works.)

And then there’s Emily Skinner. One rarely gets to see an actress of her star power in such close quarters so I

was blissfully unaware who was playing the role of a repressed, waspish and increasingly desperate school teacher in *Picnic*. All I knew was that she was terrific. It helped that she was paired with Cariani; together, the two of them generated real pathos and tension from their relationship of convenience. For a few brief scenes, they made me believe that Inge might actually be worth revisiting. But after two evenings of Inge, I think the credit must go to them rather than the playwright.

BROADWAY BY THE YEAR: THE 1940S \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

## THE TOWN HALL

For almost 20 years now, Broadway By The Year has been a theatrical institution, bridging cabaret and Broadway to celebrate the best of musical theater. After many, many evenings of solid to great entertainment, seeing it stumble a bit for the very first time only underlines what an accomplishment the series has been for so many years. It's truly a question of three-dimensional chess every time: creator Scott Siegel recruits big names and rising stars, pairs them with one another and the right tunes, all to deliver an evening of well-paced, delightful singing peppered with trivia about the era of the Great White Way being focused on.

I'd add another wrinkle to those challenges and that's making sure the vocalists are varied enough to prevent a sense of sameness from settling in. Siegel has been doing this for many years; I just never quite appreciated it before. That's what bedeviled this evening's spotlight on tunes from the 1940s. The two lead male vocalists — Ben Davis and Daniel Reichard — are both old school beltors of an almost pre-Bing Crosby nature. Under the best of circumstances, it's not my favorite approach. But following one after the other made them feel interchangeable.

Adding to the problem was Lesli Margharita (a "big" singer with a comic verve and no truck for nuance) and the wonderful Klea Blackhurst, who can put over an Ethel Merman tune like nobody's business (including "There's No Business Like Show Business"). Any one of them would have shone brighter mixed in with other styles of singers but all of them together gave the evening an unfortunate repetition. Worse, Siegel brought back an obligatory "take another bow" for every single performance, which cheapens the times when the audience wants to demand one and makes for awkward moments when they don't. Toss in two ballroom dancers with a coldly impersonal chemistry (Lou Brockman and Heather Gehring) and an admittedly excellent whistler (Steve Herbst) and the evening had a grab bag vibe I've never experienced before from this series and probably won't again for years, if ever.



But you can't gather a bunch of talented people in a room and not have a little magic. Ben Davis had a booming voice but when he sang without a mike it ironically led him to deliver a little more subtlety. And he and Margherita's big, big personalities worked to advantage when they teamed on the jokey "Anything You Can Do" from *Annie Get Your Gun*.

The two saving graces were Blackhurst and Tony winner Karen Ziemba (who starred in the very first show I saw when I moved to New York in 1991 — the revue *And The World Goes 'Round* — and has wowed me ever since). Blackhurst may have the ability to belt like the others, but she uses it with much more finesse. Backed by the evening's always strong Ross Patterson trio, she swung the heck out of "Taking A Chance On Love." Blackhurst didn't need the assist (she was already soaring) but the song went into high gear when the multi-talented hooper, singer and actor Kendrick Jones slid onto stage to tap out a duet. I swear he's grown a foot since the last time I saw him, all in his legs. Jones (pictured above) returned later for a solo turn and any Broadway show is better when he's in it. Blackhurst closed the show in style and had a comic highlight with

“I’ve Still Got My Health.”

Ziamba was also a treat every time she appeared, from a gentle “How Are Things In Glocca Morra?” to a buoyant “I Got The Sun In The Mornin’.” Ella Fitzgerald’s gently dizzy take on “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered” is engraved on my heart so Ziamba threw me with her more rhapsodic take. But like the artist she is, it was a carefully crafted performance that built convincingly and emotionally to its big finish. Toss in a lovely “Right As The Rain” and these two women (and Jones) saved the night.

I heard the most recent show in the series (which i missed) was its usual excellent self and I’m already anticipating a major rebound for their season finale on May 22. And the no-mike portion of the show is such a consistent treat I want to finally catch the Broadway Unplugged concerts often bursting with big (and big-lunged) talent. The next one is on May 1, also at Town Hall, which remains one of my favorite spaces in the city. Call me a cock-eyed optimist but I’ve seen too many good concerts from Siegel to see a single less than solid evening as anything more than a one-off occurrence.

## Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public’s UTR Festival) \*\*

Lula del Ray (The Public’s UTR Festival) \*\*

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public’s UTR Festival at the Kitchen) \*\*

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public’s UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) \*\*

The Present \*\*

The Liar \*\*\* 1/2

Jitney \*\*\* 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann’s) \*\*\* 1/2

Significant Other \* 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth \*\*\*

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) \*\* (third visit, but \*\*\* if you haven’t seen it)

*Everybody* (at Signature) \*\* 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) \*\*\* 1/2



Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) \*\*\*\*

The Light Years \* 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) \*\*\* 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips \*\*

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) \*

Come From Away \*

*Miss Saigon* \*\*

*Picnic/Come Back Little Sheeba* \* 1/2

*Broadway By The Year: The 1940s* \*\*

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***Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.***