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FUN HOME ** out of ****

LIVING ON LOVE * 1/2 out of ****

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CIRCLE IN THE SQUARE

It's a treat to see a serious new musical with top flight talent involved. But it's a real luxury getting to see it twice. When Fun Home debuted at the Public, it opened to almost universal praise. I respected it and admired the cast, but my two and a half stars (out of four) were a little generous. I was mixed on it emotionally but my intellect leaned towards three stars. It's no fun not quite getting the rapture of others; who wants to miss out on a show everyone else is loving? So I was ready and eager to see it again at Circle In The Square. Maybe it would grow on me.

Unfortunately, this production is inferior to the original one at the Public I had reservations about. I felt the design of that 2013 version was a little scattershot, but the puzzle of staging this show in the round has flummoxed the creative team entirely. It should feel intimate for a Broadway house but in fact the characters always seem to be on the other side of the stage with their back to you, no matter where you're seated. But the real problem is that a second chance to hear the score and see the show makes clear that my initial reservations have been reinforced. Graphic novelist Alison Bechdel's graphic novel has been musicalized with passion and integrity -- it just hasn't been musicalized very well.

The great hook of the story is that our heroine Alison realizes she is a lesbian just as her father's secret gay life comes crashing down around him. Alison comes out to her parents and mere months later her father dies in what Alison concludes was a suicide. We haven't seen that before. The great irony is that the strongest moments of Fun Home are the very familiar details of a little girl growing up and coming out. We've seen that before but those scenes have a warmth and humor sorely lacking in the rest of the show.

The show's greatest assets are its three Alisons, all of whom starred in it at the Public. It's narrated by adult Alison (Beth Malone), who is a little more stranded here by director Sam Gold as she wanders around the set during flashbacks. Those flashbacks come with a clarity that is a credit to the book of Lisa Kron, who also did the lyrics. We enjoy Middle Alison (Emily Skeggs) as she goes to college and comes out. And we relish the sharp presence of Small Alison (Sydney Lucas), a little girl always searching for attention from her fitfully present father Bruce (Michael Cerveris). The more confident and sure of herself Alison becomes, the more uncertain and unmoored her father becomes. He can't handle a world where gay people are visible because Bruce has spent his entire life trying to hide from himself.

"Fun Home" is the nickname of their dad's business, the local funeral home. It's just one of his pursuits, since Bruce is also an English teacher and a passionate collector of antiques, turning their home into a showcase worthy of tours. Bruce's idea of seduction is to take a new handsome and young hired hand into his study to check out the wallpaper he's found that will be perfect for it.

Bruce is a repressed man, to say the least, and Cerveris spends half the show swallowing his lines and his

emotions. Judy Kuhn is similarly constrained as his wife, a woman dutifully ignoring the havoc created by her husband's self-destructive behavior. Both of them have arias of pain and regret to deliver towards the end, but it's not nearly enough, even in a tight 100 minute show.

Notably, Alison's siblings make virtually no impression, while Joel Perez plays an endless string of Bruce's objects of affections (the handyman, a high school student and so on) but they all seem essentially the same person.

It seems silly to say but even Alison doesn't seem like the artist she'll be, despite her character constantly underlining the action by referencing how she would caption this or that scene when she turns it into a comic. The scenic and costume design by David Zinn doesn't help. The set in particular is endlessly popping in and out of sight to no good effect. At the Public, there was a half-hearted attempt to indicate the graphic novel origins of the story. Perhaps budget and the constraints of a small space kept them from more? But no. On Broadway, they still only offer a half-hearted attempt of indicating a graphic novel come to life by revealing lit-up square boxes on the floor of the stage at intermittent moments. It makes the stage look more like the floor of a disco than a graphic novel; the conceit should have been developed fully or dropped altogether.

Later, at one key scene, a large gaping hole is left in the middle of the stage, perhaps to create some suspense. It actually drained away the tension since this foreshadowed too heavily the death we knew was looming. And when that death occurred by having an actor walk into the light (and off stage) rather than diving or falling into the giant hole, it also felt like a bit of bait and switch. That typifies a show where the entrances and exits orchestrated by Gold feel slack and unfocused.

It all boils down to the songs and that's the main failing here. They are unnamed, but the two best numbers would surely be called "Keys" and "I'm Changing My Major To Joan." In one, the young Alison feels an immediate and deep identification with the strong, handsome delivery woman she spots wearing jeans and sporting a big ring of keys. It's funny but much more than that, perfectly capturing a child who is gay and how that's so much more than sex: it's identity. In the other, Alison rhapsodizes over her first sexual experience and first girlfriend, Joan. While neither is "catchy" in a show tune sort of way, both have strong, melodic lines, specific and memorable lyrics and deepen the character we're getting to know in ways both detailed and universal. A friend who saw the show a year and a half ago immediately sang snatches of those two numbers.

But you'd be hard pressed to do the same with any others. They have awkward vocal lines, vague meandering lyrics and scream out "high art." Composer Jeanine Tesori crafted some memorable melodies for her breakout show Violet. She seems to have been running from them ever since and Fun Home is mostly no exception. Something is very wrong when talent like Michael Cerveris and Judy Kuhn can't bring a song to life.

Given the material, it's no surprise that the two actresses with the two best songs make the best impression. Skeggs is winning as Middle Alison and Lucas is giving a complete performance as Little Alison. Whether singing or acting, she's always present and always heartbreakingly vulnerable to the turmoil just beneath the surface of her family. She's so very young, but I can easily imagine Lucas winning a Tony. What's even crazier when talking about a kid in her Broadway debut is that I can imagine seeing her on the stage for years to come. Hey, if that's the case and this show is best remembered for introducing a new talent, Fun Home will have a happy ending after all.

LIVING ON LOVE * 1/2 out of ****

LONGACRE THEATRE

Well, the cast was having fun! At the curtain call for this shoulder shrug of a comedy -- "What did you think of it?" **shrug** -- the cast were a bunch of Chatty Cathys. This actor was talking away to that actor and the others were giggling over something as well. Then came the show's best laugh. The curtain fell quickly but then the cast pulled it aside and stepped to the edge of the stage a la the Metropolitan Opera for their final hammy bows.

They all made grand gestures to the crowd and tried to usher each other off the stage so they could grab one final bit of applause. The fact that the audience was halfway out the door but enjoyed this stunt more than most anything that came before somehow made it even funnier. And my guest swore that during the show Jerry O'Connell was pursing his lips and trying to make Renée Fleming laugh during her scenes. Hey, you get your kicks where you can.

If the very light comedy *Living On Love* were a commercial hit, we'd call it "critic proof." But in this case I fear it seems an audience proof play about battling divas. Douglas Sills is the Maestro, a classical music conductor who bristles at the very mention of Leonard Bernstein when he's not seducing young sopranos to the sound of his own recording of Ravel's "Bolero."

The Maestro is getting on in years but still spending money like a madman. Ghost writer Jerry O'Connell pays daily visits hoping to pry some facts out of the great man so they can write his memoirs. No luck. The maestro rises late and can't be bothered to reveal anything more than the endless string of women he slept with. That's your clue that this show is set in the 1950s. The writer can't actually use stories of constant casual sex in the book. If it were set today, they'd have a bestseller.

O'Connell doesn't really care anyway. He only took this assignment so he could meet the Maestro's wife La Diva (Fleming, naturally). She swans in with her tiny dog Puccini and the dog barely raises a sigh from the audience...when a dog onstage is the easiest crowd pleaser out there today! (The only thing audiences like more is partial or full nudity from stars; O'Connell gamely takes off his shirt and covers his chest in olive oil.) Puccini has to come back onstage later to get her deserved sighs, one more sign of a lackluster show, directed with less than her usual polish by Kathleen Marshall.

Anyway, this unhappily married couple is desperately broke and they actually need money. The Maestro has already spent his advance, so the Diva gets her own book deal. Soon she's working with O'Connell while the Maestro snags a young gal (Anna Chlumsky) to be his new ghost writer and hilarity ensues.

The play is by Joe DiPietro, based on a play best forgotten (apparently) by Garson Kanin. It's harmless, if you consider a bland night of theater harmless. Amidst all the nonsense, two servants keep popping in and out, played by Blake Hammond and Scott Robertson. They're mostly there to make set changes seem amusing (they sing or play the piano or otherwise goof around) but it felt more like a time-killer to me. O'Connell and Chlumsky are game but never get into any rhythm, though O'Connell is far more in the spirit of the thing than she. The great opera singer Renée Fleming doesn't fall flat. She's certainly not an accomplished comedian but she gets the lines out and does enough to get by. If the show were actually any good, her presence might be annoying since she'd be holding the play back. But as it is, it's pleasantly amusing to see her traverse such an entirely new world. It would be ill advised of her to do it again, however.

The one bright spot is Douglas Sills as the Maestro. He sports an absurd Italian accent and ridiculous dialogue that Sills delivers with gusto. Oh he can't make it funny but by god he shows you what he can do even with shoddy material like this. Oddly, the last few minutes grow a little serious. There's a minor revolt from the servants (obviously an added flourish from DiPietro) that was almost touching, sort of. Then the Diva sang Irving Berlin's "Always" and the Maestro joined in and we had a little moment. It wasn't much, but you get your kicks where you can.

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