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## Michael Giltz

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# Theater: Not So "Good People," Fine "Timon," Lovely "Nightingale" and No KO for "Beautiful Burnout"

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GOOD PEOPLE \*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
TIMON OF ATHENS \*\*\*  
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BEAUTIFUL BURNOUT \*\*

GOOD PEOPLE \*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
Manhattan Theatre Club at Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

Playwright David Lindsay-Abaire tackles the haves and the have-nots in his unfortunately thin followup to the Pulitzer Prize-winning dram *Rabbit Hole*. Who are the good people in this story? You can't help rooting for Margaret (Frances McDormand, in fine form). She's a

single mom in the poor neighborhood of South Boston with a special needs kid, struggling to get by when she's fired from the Dollar Store for being perpetually late. And why is she late? Because she can't afford decent daycare and has to wait for her landlady to show up before Margaret can take off for her low-paying job. It's the latest in a string of jobs she's held down.

In one of the show's more effective moments, Margaret details the tenuous hold she has on surviving by showing how taking a bite of some hard candy leads to a chipped tooth which leads to a dentist appointment (delayed for six months until she can't bear it any longer -- by then of course, it's infected

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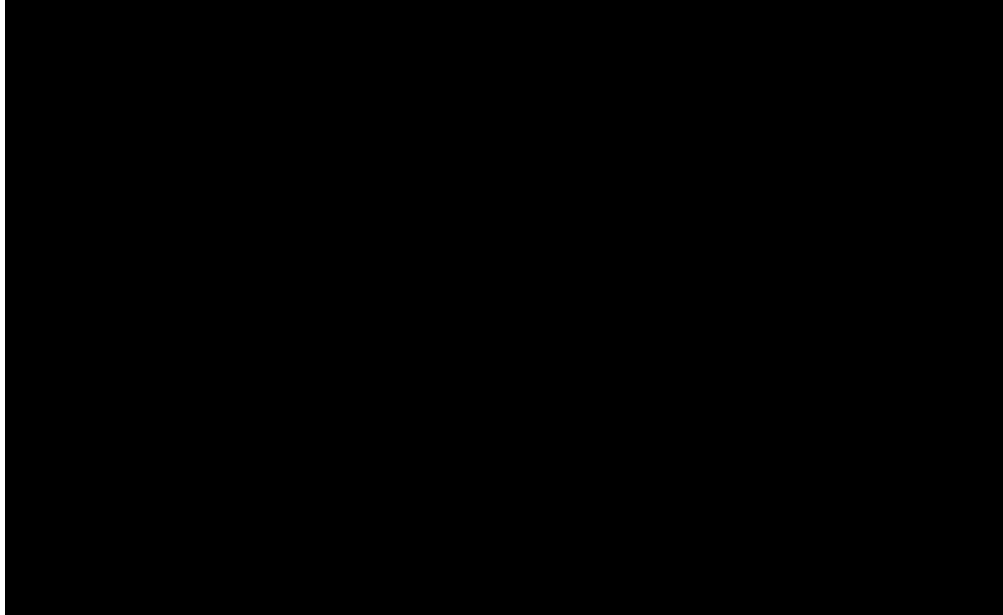


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and more expensive to fix) which leads to a late car payment which leads to no car which leads to being late to work which leads to another job down the tube.



Is Stevie good people? Played by Patrick Carroll, he's a morose sort of guy who manages the Dollar Store. He tells Margaret he has to fire her or he'll be fired himself (she's had eight warnings about her tardiness). But Margaret thinks that's b.s.

What about her landlady, played with vigor by Estelle Parsons? Dottie might be eying Margaret's apartment as a crash pad for her ne'er do well son and she's always late for babysitting. But Dottie charges \$50 a week -- which isn't exactly high -- and taking care of a special needs kid isn't exactly a piece of cake. Margaret goes along with Dottie's defense of her behavior, but maybe she can't afford to offend the only person who will watch her kid for such a low price.

Then there's Mike (Tate Donovan). Mike and Margaret dated briefly in high school, but he got up and out of the South Boston neighborhood through hard work, smarts and the advantage of a dad who pushed him to succeed. He likes boasting about his tough childhood but certainly doesn't hang around with the old gang anymore. A fertility doctor, Mike has a nice office in a nice neighborhood. Out of desperation, Margaret pushes her way into his workplace and asks for a job.

**That's the set-up for *Good People*.** Rather predictably, every character is seen in one light and then in another -- Margaret works hard, but she might be racist. Mike has a black wife, but has a shameful past. Stevie fires Margaret, but keeps trying to help her out. And so on. The first act has some plot -- Margaret gets fired and then bullies Mike into inviting her to his birthday party so she can try and cadge a job from one of his friends. But the action is so minor, the conflict so minimal, you don't really feel like the play has even begun.

Act two has a little more zip. It's mostly set in Mike's home. When he calls Margaret to say the party has been canceled, she thinks he's lying and shows up anyway, setting off a showdown of sorts between Mike, his wife Kate (a solid Renee Elise Goldsberry) and Margaret. Lindsay-Abaire is too much of a pro not to land some punches here, including some funny lines about Kate being mistaken for a nanny and Mike's Dominican secretary. But it all boils down rather simplistically to the rich being indifferent or callous and the poor being noble and kind. The gray areas it serves up simply aren't that convincing. Margaret is pushy, but she's got a kid to feed. Mike does volunteer work (or at least donates money and sits on boards), but he cheats on his wife and was a punk growing up.

Still, it's hard to buy Margaret completely. She's blunt or rather pushy -- the sort of person who insults you, takes a little dig and then says "I'm just busting your balls," as if that makes it alright. She wants to be the one who let Mike escape the neighborhood by breaking up with him and at the same time the long-suffering martyr who pays the price for his indifference. McDormand creates sympathy for her simply by the dint of her forceful, winning personality. But Tate Donovan's Mike simply isn't complicated or interesting enough to serve as a foil. No matter what we learn about him, the play isn't about Mike and so we just don't care that much.



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Daniel Sullivan pumps what life he can into the second act and the sets by John Lee Beatty are typically cleverly done, convincing and to the point. The play ends with Margaret at bingo, holding a marker over her cards and dispiritedly looking for the lucky break that never comes. Life isn't easy for a lot of people, certainly not for Margaret. That doesn't make her good or bad and unfortunately here it doesn't make her very interesting either.

**TIMON OF ATHENS** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

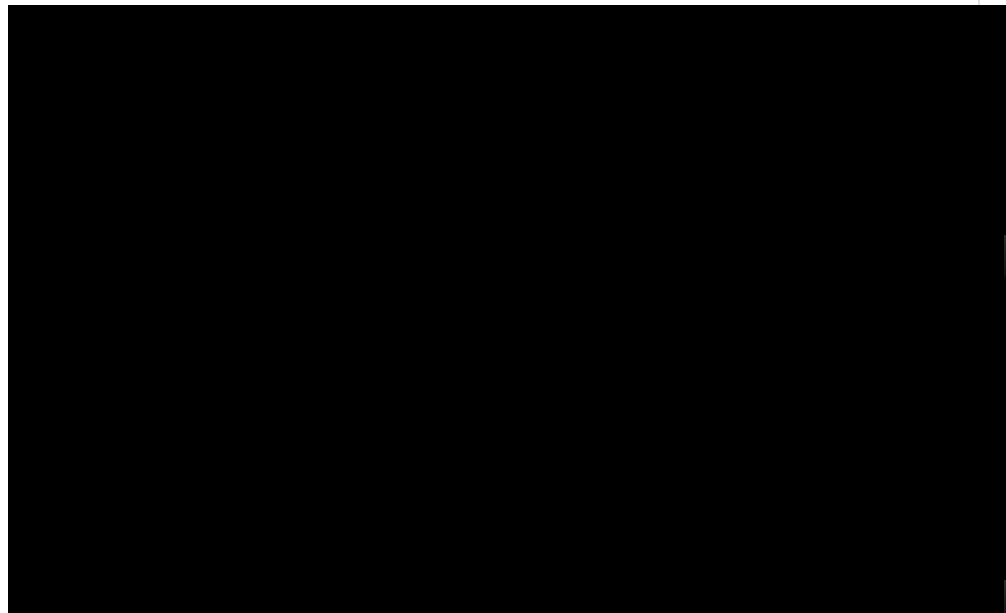
### The Public

The Public Theatre is world famous for its free performances of Shakespeare in the Park. But it also has one of the best bargains in the city for theater you pay for: the Public Lab offers shows at \$15 a pop. You might expect glorified workshops or middling offerings by minor talents. But time and again it's proven a good launching pad for new works and a chance for serious artists to explore less commercial fare. Case in point: *Timon of Athens*.

When the economy collapsed, the Public decided to mount two Shakespeare plays that revolve around money. *The Merchant Of Venice* received a glorious revival that transferred to Broadway. *Timon of Athens* is a much more problematic play. But Richard Thomas of *The Waltons* and director Barry Edelstein wanted to tackle it.

Judicious pruning of the text hasn't turned *Timon* into a great play. But it has enabled them to deliver a good one, focused with laser precision on debt. Timon can be seen as a bit of a fool, too profligate by far with his money and soaking up praise by hangers-on. If you bring a bottle of wine to his house for dinner, he'll send you home with a barrel. Or two. Admire his spurs and he'll insist you take his entire riding outfit.

But with Thomas and his inherent decency shining through in the role, Timon is shown in a more positive light. He's a friendly, generous man who is foolish with cash but only because he wants to see the best in others. When his debts mount up and he turns to his friends for help, Timon is truly disappointed they don't come through.



Similarly, a righteous Reg. E. Cathey is an Athenian captain who has served his country bravely. It is clearly in his debt. When he asks for mercy from the Senators of Athens for a soldier (the minor salve of banishing the man for life rather than killing him) and is rudely denied, Cathey is also shocked. Have his good deeds earned him nothing?

With this focus, the play has rarely made more sense, from Timon's behavior in the beginning (usually just annoying since the men around him are such sycophants) to his disdain for the gold that falls into his lap towards the end. Thomas is stronger in the first half when he's dispensing treasure and waiting for his kindness to be returned. But he smartly leavens the tragedy of Timon's situation in the second half with humor and self-awareness.



**'Bed Intruder' Star Antoine Dodson Arrested**



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Theater doesn't need elaborate sets for a thoughtful, clever production, as Edelstein and his creative team show. The pace of the first act is bracing, with one scene tumbling upon another. The costumes are a modern mix that get across status without bothering with period exactness. Curtis Moore's vivid and electric guitar-heavy score (played with aplomb by Simon Kafka) adds to the sense of excitement.

And the cast is solid from top to bottom. For a long time, American performances of Shakespeare featured one or two leads who handled the lines with ease and the rest lagging far behind. The gap between US and British actors when it came to the Bard was substantial. No more. Here the Public offers up strong players throughout, led by Thomas and Cathey through the sycophants like Greg McFadden and Anthony Manna to the cynical truth-teller of Max Casella down to the handsome Joe Paulik handling several small roles with ease.

So catch this *Timon* if you can by March 6. And be certain to keep an eye out for [future Public Lab offerings](#) from the world premiere of *Urge For Going* starting March 25 and the New York premiere of *Knickerbocker* in May.

#### THE NIGHTINGALE AND OTHER SHORT FABLES \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

[BAM Opera House](#)

Director Robert Lepage is one of the most acclaimed, distinctive directors working in theater and opera and film for decades. Yet somehow I've managed to miss his work completely, much as it has intrigued me from afar. So it was satisfying to finally see him in action with this sweet evening of puppetry and music performed by the Canadian Opera Company [at the Brooklyn Academy of Music](#).

The set is lovely: two open-air pavilions on each side of the stage with a pool of water connecting them. The left side is empty while the right features a tree-like large branch jutting up out of the ground. Water must be one of the most effective elements to use in a show because it always enchants. Here the rippling of the water is reflected on the walls and right up to the ceiling of the Opera House, creating a dream-like effect from the start.

The first act is composed of short musical pieces composed by Igor Stravinsky, as well as the brief fable *The Fox: Farmyard Burlesque*. Puppetry of various sorts is at the heart of this show. Early tunes are illustrated with shadow puppetry performed by artists on the left pavilion. A ripple of pleasure swept through the crowd when they displayed their craft, so simple and yet beguiling. The singing was fine if not perhaps as robust as one might like for peasant tunes. But Teiya Kasahara was notably moving on the haunting *Two Poems* by Konstantin Balmont and Meredith Arwady was strong on her solo "*Berceuses du chat*." Musically, Todd Palmer was flawless on his clarinet solos.

The Fox fable was told with a combination of singers and gymnastic tumbling behind a screen where their bodies created more shadow puppetry.



But it was *The Nightingale* that dominates the evening and your memory. The rest was prelude. The entire second act was taken up with the tale of a fisherman who heard the sweet singing of a nightingale

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so lovely that word of its beauty reached the Emperor of China. He had the nightingale brought to court and was so entranced by its singing he offered the bird all sorts of titles when all it really wanted was the appreciation he offered. Then emissaries from Japan arrived with a mechanical nightingale. Peeved at this affront to his dignity, the nightingale took off for the forest. Not to be outdone in peevishness, the Emperor said the nightingale couldn't take off because he'd been banished from court forever. Nonetheless, when the Emperor lay dying, the nightingale returned to bewitch Death and earn the ruler a reprieve. This time, the nightingale promises to sing for the Emperor every night.

It's a curious tale. Why exactly does the nightingale return, you wonder? But it has intrigued artists for centuries. Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater have been developing a musical version of it as their follow-up to *Spring Awakening*.

Here, Lapage uses the music of Stravinsky to embrace a positively charming production filled with puppetry. They range in size from a tiny boat and fisherman that traverse the canal that links the two pavilions to a giant skeletal Death that would fit right in on a Day Of the Dead parade. The tiny, delicate puppets are paired off with performers who both manipulate the puppets and sing the roles. The puppetry is a wonderful way to create an aura of wonder. Combine it with the music of Stravinsky and suddenly even the simple motion of the tree branch swinging out over the canal feels like a bit of magic.

The singing again is solid if unremarkable. It's the puppetry that remains front and center. Happily, there is one major exception: Olga Peretyatko as the Nightingale triumphs in the lead role. She subtly manifests the prideful arrogance of the bird, whether it's the playful impatience she shows when waiting for people to stop talking so she can sing or the immediate distrust the mechanical nightingale awakens in her ego. Peretyatko gives the story emotional heft, an intelligent throughline and glorious singing that turns the simple story from a delight (thanks to the deft puppetry) into a more moving experience.

This all-too-brief run has been a hot ticket since it was announced. **Rush to BAM by Sunday if you can or just wise up and subscribe to their seasons.**

**BEAUTIFUL BURNOUT** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

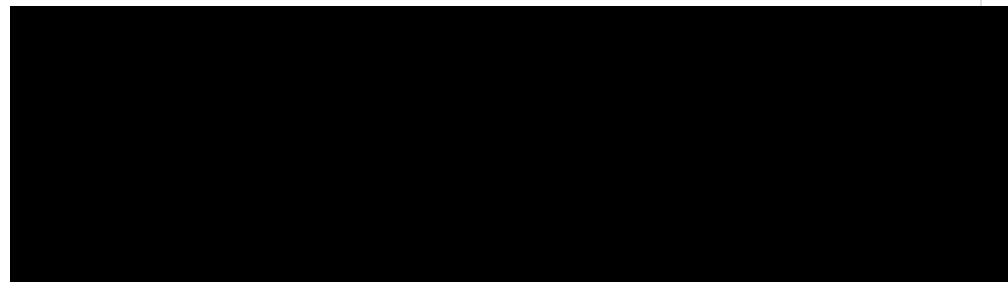
**St. Ann's Warehouse**

The Frantic Assembly/National Theatre of Scotland scored a major triumph when it came to St. Ann's with *Black Watch*. They've just announced the show is returning (with a new cast) in April for a three week run. If you missed it, don't hesitate or it might sell out again.


But that hit wasn't all the NTS scored: they also came up with their new show *Beautiful Burnout*. A visit to where the cast was dressing and showering exposed co-director Steven Hoggett to Gleason's Gym and the beauty and power of boxing. (Co-director and choreographer Scott Graham had been a lifelong fan.) Since movement and physicality is always central to Frantic Assembly's work, boxing was both a natural and a huge challenge: now audiences wouldn't just comment on their work artistically. The people who mattered most -- real boxers and boxing fans -- might just dismiss it as "wrong" if they didn't capture something essential and true about the sport while fielding a cast that could be convincing.

After a long gestation period and a lot of sparring, they've delivered this mood piece. It combines the music of *Underworld* with a modest, overly familiar storyline. Bobby (Ewan Stewart) runs a gym for serious boxers. He's been cultivating a couple of lads (and one lass) for a while: the "brown lad" Ajay Chopra (Taqi Nazeer), who is the most promising and the usual assortment of boastful kids, what passes for intellectual among athletes, and a girl (Vicki Manderson) who demands respect even though her boxing is fueled as much by rage as by a love of the sweet science.

The usual dramatics ensue: Bobby demands total and blind obedience while Ajay is a little ahead of himself and has his own ideas about the best way to box and become famous. Turning pro is a tantalizing prospect that keeps them going until Ajay and Bobby butt heads once to often and Ajay leaves. Inevitably, a showdown will occur between Bobby's chosen one and Ajay.







This presents the show as much more plot-driven than it really is. The storyline is just a wisp of a thing, an excuse really to choreograph moments on stage. The play is set on a large boxing ring, with a rotating oval in the middle. Some vivid moments occur when the music explodes and the cast is onstage bobbing and weaving in unison, skipping rope, doing push-ups and the like. Sad to say, it's not terribly interesting. *Beautiful Burnout* doesn't have enough story to support the melodramatic twists in the last few minutes (none of which feel earned) and not enough sheer beauty in the spectacle to take your mind off the cliched plot. The cast is fine, especially given their sketchy roles and they certainly work their asses off to perform the show.

It comes together once or twice. First, Eddie Kay (who also plays the boxer Neil Neill) shines as the referee, sliding around the stage at the beginning as he explains in poetic form the role he plays in the sport. The final match is staged nicely, with the referee and the girl sporting the round card criss-crossing the stage during the bout.

But it's the sparring match Bobby holds to decide who will face Ajay that fully captures what Frantic Assembly was going for. For the first time, the oval on stage begins to rotate. The boxers attack each other and then one boxer suddenly freezes as he makes contact while the other one steps away, agonizes over their mistake or rethinks a move and then steps back into place just as they both begin to fight again. It's a wonderfully theatrical way of breaking down a boxing match, capturing both the agony of those split-second moments and the beauty of the action.

They could have gone even further -- using this technique in other scenes to let the coach describe what they did wrong and how to counter it, for example, while the other player is frozen in time or just to get more fully into a boxer's head. We could have learned about the strategy and chess-like moves in boxing along with the boxer and thus come to appreciate the game even more. It would have tied in nicely with the opening monologue by the referee, which pointed the way towards a show that could have illuminated the game nicely in a fresh, theatrical way. Instead we have a show that's not gritty enough for fans and not poetic enough for those who aren't fans and not insightful enough to create any new ones.

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

Angels in America revival at Signature \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

Beautiful Burnout at St. Ann's Warehouse \*\*

Blood From A Stone \*\* 1/2

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\*\*\*\*\*

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