

Theater: Oh 'Romeo'; Joplin Lives!

Posted: 10/17/2013 3:29 pm

ROMEO & JULIET * 1/2 out of ****
A NIGHT WITH JANIS JOPLIN ** out of ****

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CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

It seemed we would be getting two *Romeo & Juliet* productions this season what with Orlando Bloom on Broadway tackling the Bard in a muddled mess and the usually dependable Classic Stage Company showcasing actress Elizabeth Olsen in their version. But in fact we get to see about 10 or 12 versions, since every actor on stage at CSC seems to be in a different show.

It was a troubled production from the start with the first Romeo bowing out for film and William Hurt -- who surely could dive back into theater in any show he wanted if he's going to go for a limited run Off Off Broadway -- stepping away as well. All involved surely wish they'd pulled the plug. But none of that excuses the non-direction of Tea Alagic that neither reins in the actors or gives them anything focused to do.

Among the many ideas scattered about are the costumes of Clint Ramos, which suggest that Juliet's Capulets are a tacky, nouveau riche family while Romeo's Montagues are aristocracy. None of this is brought out any further than the leopard print top donned by Lady Capulet (Kathryn Meisle). A splash of orange light literally divides the stage in two at the beginning to separate the two warring factions but that too is soon dropped. There's a hint of multi-cultural melting pot, what with numerous actors delivering lines early on in Spanish, Italian and Russian (I think?) though this idea is also discarded. Other thoughts come and go just as quickly.

You do know the story? Two families are bitter enemies but their only children fall madly in love. The parents refuse to countenance such a match, passions rise, Romeo is banished and the kids concoct a crazy scheme that goes dreadfully awry. Since her credits list only two parts as an understudy, I assume this is actress Elizabeth Olsen's theatrical debut in New York City, if not ever. If she were surrounded by an excellent cast, Olsen would have fared better. Her talent on film (especially the very interesting *Martha Marcy May Marlene*) is evident and she might well have the makings of a stage actress. Certainly she has some good moments here and there, both when addressing the audience and interacting with her family.

Olsen is less in luck when sharing the stage with Romeo. Actor Julian Cihl was plucked out of nowhere for the part, an unfortunate bit of casting that does him no favors. He gestures aggressively with his hands (and even his head, leaning forward and jutting out at times), over-emotes, over-enunciates and fails to find a moment to relax where we can identify with him. Of all the young actors on tap in New York City, how did they alight on him? (The casting is by Calleri Casting though this last-minute replacement was surely a group effort.) One feels sorry for Cihl, which is not the sort of thing one should be mulling over during a romantic tragedy.

Mercutio is usually a sure-fire scene stealer, but both productions have stumbled even here. On Broadway, Chrisitan Camargo is desperately trying to liven things up. Here, the marvelous stage actor T.R. Knight seems to have decided Mercutio is having a nervous breakdown. Or perhaps it was just Knight's reaction to this production. In either case, it's to be hoped we'll see him again soon in something better.

Two actors out of all this keep their dignity. Daphne Rubin-Vega creates a fully realized comic spin on the Nurse as a Latina. It's funny, convincing and -- given the proceedings -- a miracle. The Nurse is usually a delight but here she's a life-line. Watching Rubin-Vega coerce Juliet into giving her a back rub or teasing out information reminds you this is actually a good play. And watching Olsen play off of Rubin-Vega lets you see what she might become with more stage work.

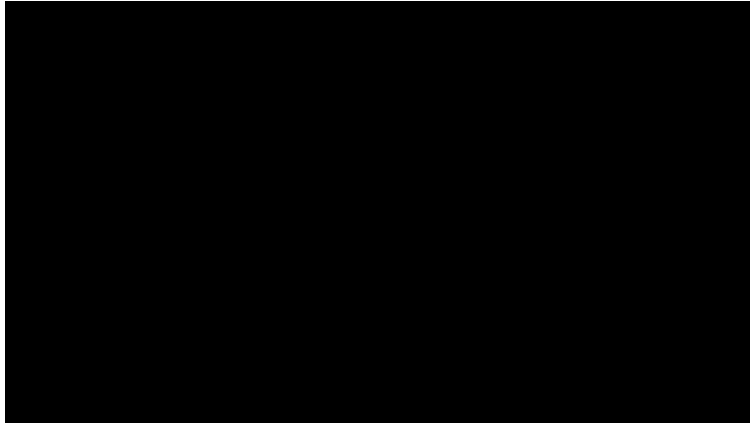
The other triumph is Daniel Davis as Friar Laurence, though it's a two-edged sword. He replaced William Hurt and delivers his lines in the King's English with clarity and purpose. Unfortunately, his character dominates by being so well-performed that when the poor Friar reveals the bungled plot that led to the twin suicides of Romeo

and Juliet you want to string him up yourself. This is all your fault, one can't help but think.

Of course the real tragedy is the entire show. Never was a story of more woe, but in this and the Broadway production, it's for all the wrong reasons.

A NIGHT WITH JANIS JOPLIN ** out of **
LYCEUM THEATRE**

Well, they got one thing right. Mary Bridget Davies is a dead ringer for Janis Joplin. Her singing and even her speaking nail down the particulars of that legendary rocker to the nth degree. I've never understood the appeal of tribute bands. I'd love to see Led Zeppelin but I don't have the slightest interest in seeing some guys ape Led Zeppelin. Nonetheless, with this crack band on stage and Davies on lead vocals, fun could be had in a rock venue where you can stand and dance along and drink a beer while they crashed through a 60 minute set of Joplin's best. Indeed, B.B. King's is a very sterile, suburban-mall of a music venue, but I can imagine even the show they put on there for the press was pretty fun.



Unfortunately, what we have here is a two and a half hour set stretched out over two acts and filled with rambling asides by Joplin that reveal almost nothing about her we didn't know already. She explained at least five or six times what the blues are -- they're a hole, a vacuum, the not having something you really want to have and on and on and on. Joplin tells us she listened to a Bessie Smith record and it changed her life. But so did going to the library. And so did finding the art books in the library. And so did playing on stage with an electric band for the first time. You get the drift.

These meaningless asides are literally non-stop. Except for a medley, I don't think we ever heard two songs in a row without stopping to hear Joplin mutter something about how her mom played lots of cast albums or she worked a lot of odd jobs. Even worse, many of the songs she does sing are truncated.

Knowing that her catalog of well-known tunes is pretty thin, writer-director Randy Johnson came up with the idea of peopling the show with Joplin's many influences. An excellent quartet of singers -- dubbed the Joplinaires -- provide backup and also get to shine as such iconic figures as Odetta, Aretha Franklin, Etta James, Bessie Smith and so on. Dance captain Taprena Michelle Augustine is simply vocally and physically miscast as Smith but she shines on "Today I Sing The Blues." Allison Blackwell triumphs doing a spin on Leontyne Price's "Summertime" and almost as well playing the Queen of Soul Franklin in what I believe is an imaginary duet on "Spirit In The Dark." De'adre Aziza has fun as the regal Nina Simone and Odetta while Nikki Kimbrough wails nicely as James.

They are the show's not-so secret weapon, giving Davies frequent breaks from the throat-tearing wails of Joplin without pausing the music. But god forbid any momentum build; the moment that threatens to happen they stop for yet another unrevealing anecdote. I've no idea why Joplin's influences/forebears are singing the Bob Dylan classic "I Shall Be Released" but it seemed like the big finale for those singers and cried out for Davies to join them onstage, with Joplin and her idols united in song. Instead, that's followed by an oddly desultory "Me and Bobby McGee."

The show usually knows a show stopper when it's got one and Davies is given a pause so fans can clamor after a faithful rendition of "Summertime" or "Down On Me" or "Piece Of My Heart." Weirdly, the vocal blast of "I Shall Be Released" in the second act is followed by her sole #1 hit, the Kris Kristofferson-penned "Bobby McGee" and it's tossed off indifferently and falls flat. That's followed by a song written specifically for Joplin by one of her favorite songwriters, Jerry Ragovoy. Called "I'm Gonna Rock My Way To Heaven," it was intended for Joplin's next solo album; unfortunately it's far from his best and the song is reprised again unnecessarily right towards the end.

Even the inevitable sing-along of "Mercedes Benz" feels a little off, with Davies in a rare vocal misstep sounding a little harsh and high-pitched.

If you lifted out the musical moments, cut the numbers that didn't work and woke up "Me and Bobby McGee" (whose flatness is the real puzzler here) you'd have a fine tribute to Joplin and her influences that might run 80 minutes and play well in a rock venue. But on Broadway, padded out and slowed down, it's a drag that the real Janis wouldn't have sat still for.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnicula: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **

STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *
Women Or Nothing ** 1/2
Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play * 1/2
You Never Can Tell ***
Romeo And Juliet *
Arguendo **
August Wilson's American Century Cycle ****
The Glass Menagerie ** 1/2
Lady Day * 1/2
Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse ****
Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical ** 1/2
Bronx Bombers * 1/2
Romeo & Juliet at CSC * 1/2
A Night With Janis Joplin **

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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.

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