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THE BLOG

Theater: Oscar Nominee Mark Rylance Back on Stage (For the Moment); Nellie McKay Charms in 'Broadway By The Year: The 1930s'

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NICE FISH *** out of ****

BROADWAY BY THE YEAR: THE 1930s *** out of ****

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ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE

You go to the theater, literally. But what exactly do you do there? You shuffle into a room and sit in the dark. People -- perhaps one or four or seventeen, the number varies -- usually share a story of some sort. Then you shuffle out again into the night. Often, you receive a souvenir, a program of folded paper listing the actors and writer and director and so on. In England, you must pay for this souvenir. In the U.S., this souvenir is free. In other countries, we must assume, the practice varies. If it's a small show, the sort a friend invites you to as a favor (yours, not theirs), the souvenir might be a crudely mimeographed piece of paper, modest proof that you were there and evidence of what you saw. If it's a big show, the souvenir might contain pictures and stories about other shows you might see, shows with souvenirs of their own, souvenirs containing articles about the show you saw that led to them in the first place. The world of the theater is a rather small globe, after all, and you can conquer it with persistence and a good amount of money, which is part of the appeal. Some people take these souvenirs home and they keep them in a pile or file them away in neat little folders arranged alphabetically by year or by categories like play and musical and one-person show or by year AND categories such as play and musical and one-person show. The possibilities are endless. Other people keep the souvenirs for a short

while, but can't commit to such a sustained relationship. Still others toss the souvenir on the floor of the theater, perhaps letting it fall as they stand up when the show is over. Littering as criticism. (Perhaps all littering is criticism, of a sort.) Patrons shuffle and slide along these slippery piles of "no's" as they head for the exit. Soon, too soon, the dimmed lights are turned up again on the empty theater, actors alone somewhere in the basement grimly removing makeup, the ushers sweeping up the rejections after the people have gone, taking the stained souvenirs -- the clumps of boredom and sighs and thinking about the sitter and glancing at the watch and fumbling for the phone when it beeps and plans for a drink or maybe a bite or maybe another time -- and tossing them into the garbage.

In the case of *Nice Fish*, I'll be saving the souvenir (which has some of the funniest notes you'll find from the creators). It's a bauble of a show, spun glass, fragile and light and a little silly and serious all at the same time. Actor and impresario Mark Rylance made it happen but the star is the prose poetry of Louis Jenkins, an artist Rylance has touted for many years. For most people, their first impression of Rylance came when he won a Tony Award in 2008. Without preamble or explanation, on national tv he began reciting one of the poems of Jenkins, to the confused delight of the theater community.

Here's a video of that speech/performance.

Naturally, people assumed Rylance was high. But the amused questions of "what was that all about?" soon led to a higher profile for Jenkins. Rylance is one of the most highly acclaimed actors working today, the early driving force of Shakespeare's Globe (where I first saw him) and now an Oscar-nominated star with his fine work in *Bridge Of Spies*. He's used his success wisely and boldly. Rylance brought all-male productions

of Shakespeare onto Broadway to universal acclaim. Now he's accomplished the quixotic project of turning poems by Jenkins into an evening of theater. Apparently worked on substantially since its premiere via the American Repertory Theater at the Guthrie in 2013, it arrives in New York City at St. Ann's Warehouse in lovely form.

Note that I said "an evening of theater." It's not a plot-driven work by any stretch of the imagination. Overseen with meticulous care by director/composer Claire van Kampen, it shows two men ice fishing in Minnesota. An amusingly simple set (by Todd Rosenthal) creates the whimsical mood: a stage covered in white ice and snow slopes towards the back, a small ice house visible farther back on stage left and way back a town perhaps, with small cars tooling back and forth. They're obviously tiny little motorized cars and the vibe is playful.

The poetry begins. Erik (Jim Lichtscheidl) is bundled up but addresses the audience while reciting a piece of Jenkins, a poem that compares the worried fretting he feels with the dazed look of a deer and ultimately the dumbfounded expression on a painted lure. It's silly, funny, wryly amused and sad. The last line is handed off to Ron (Rylance) and that gives the kicker a more vigorous spin.

Right away, the dynamics of the show are established. The setting, the actors, the way the poems are broken up into monologues and dialogues or juxtaposed against one another create a conversation and carry us through the 95 minutes I feared would be too long but was not, not quite. Just when the action might lag, another actor is introduced, at one point a young woman (an engaging Kayli Carter), at another a crusty old bastard named Wayne (played well on the night I attended by Raye Birk) or an officer of the law (Bob Davis). Connecting bits of dialogue, some physical comedy inspired by high winds or falling temperatures and the like appear just when needed to keep us off balance, to maintain the modest forward momentum of the night. The marvelous sound design of Scott W. Edwards is essential to the sense of unity and purpose in the evening, along with the judicious lighting of Japhy Weideman. It's a high wire act and much of the pleasure is in the balance.

The supporting cast is solid, with Davis especially strong as an officer from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR, for short). His hilarious back and forth with Rylance and Lichtsheidl over the proper license needed to ice fish for 24 hours versus 72 hours had a manic rhythm and giddy absurdity worthy of Monty Python at its absolute best.

But the heart of the show is the comic duo of Erik and Ron, two middle-aged men floundering about on the ice. Lichtsheidl has a deadpan demeanor, his frustration over Ron's clueless behavior (playing a car radio too loud, slipping around, dropping his cell phone into an ice hole) simmers beneath the surface with restrained despair, a la Oliver Hardy. Rylance delights in a quavering, questioning Minnesota accent, giving a bemused larky twirl to his lines that is utterly engaging. He's a clown here of the purest sort and Rylance spins a muttered line, an awkward pause, a tremulous voice into both humor and pathos. He is -- somehow -- showily modest, utterly grounded and simple in his gestures, yet magnetic to watch.

And the ending -- a rush of costume changes and sped-up possibilities -- climaxes quite absurdly and beautifully with an old couple tottering off into oblivion. Perhaps the highest compliment I can pay to what might have seemed a vanity project is to say I look forward to seeing *Nice Fish* again years from now with other actors bringing different notes to its suburban Beckett-like bleakness. It's not just a showcase for the poetry of Jenkins; it's a genuine work of theater.

BROADWAY BY THE YEAR: THE 1930s *** out of **** **TOWN HALL**

Well, I didn't see that coming! *Broadway By The Year* is now an institution in New York City, an annual series of concerts overseen by [impresario Scott Siegel](#) which showcase theater and cabaret artists covering the great hits of the Great White Way. But like any institution, BBTY must keep evolving -- without losing what makes it special -- so as to avoid becoming stale. This season of four shows begins with a focus on the 1930s and features a host of such changes. The lighting is classier and more intimate than ever and the stars on stage are fewer. Yes, fewer. Whereas the last few seasons expanded from a focus on individual years to decades, they also featured practically a new artist for every song.

Now Siegel has shaken things up again. You get fewer artists, but more

performances from each. Rather than one or two songs, each major artist is delivering three or four numbers. Change is good! On the plus side, the evening I caught included the wonderful talents of Nellie McKay and any sane person would rather hear three or four songs from Nellie McKay instead of one or two. But if someone is having an off night (it happens), now you know they'll keep coming back, rather than disappearing after their one less than stellar turn.

Act 1 was a little shaky. Tony winner Tonya Pinkins and Tony nominee Robert Cuccioli both seemed to be in less than great form, each of them finding it uncomfortable in their upper range. Rising singers Philippa Lynas and Brian Charles Rooney were both overshadowed by the tap dancers in their upbeat duets (tall glass of water Luke Hawkins and nimble hooper Michela Marino Lerman, respectively). Tony nominee Emily Skinner was fine but not moving in the finale "I'll Be Seeing You."

Happily, Skinner was much stronger with her first and best number of the night, "I'll Tell The Man In The Street." Cabaret legend Billy Stritch was in smooth, winning form on two songs before dashing off to his own engagement, in particular swinging "Comes Love" with verve.

And then there was Nellie McKay, one of the most sweetly subversive, talented and just plain endearing performers around. She's recorded a string of acclaimed albums, done acclaimed cabaret shows, given acclaimed performances on Broadway, received acclaim for her political activism and probably gets acclaim just for being so smart and sweet when she wakes up in the morning. (McKay knows the most revolutionary stance one can take in this cynical world is to be sincere.) She delivered a very good version of "But Not For Me," her voice this evening sounding especially lovely and her delivery as always uncovering the heart of the lyrics. But it was her first number of the night -- "Life Is Just A Bowl Of Cherries" -- that was the most magical. She strode to the spotlight and with just a ukulele and a soft, gentle voice that somehow penetrated to the rafters, McKay hushed the crowd and held them spellbound. The little old lady behind me turned and asked her companion, "Who was that??!!" Indeed.

Here's video of McKay on the ukulele at an entirely different event, rehearsing "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying." The first few seconds have some offhand, hard to hear chatter, but as soon as they launch into the song, you'll get a great closeup look of McKay at her best.

The only reason the audience didn't shower McKay with applause was because they were so sleepy. Act 1 was very heavy on ballads; worse, the few upbeat numbers were mostly the weakest (Stritch excepted). That pacing, along with the darker than usual lighting had the folk a bit subdued. I don't know what happened but I like to think Siegel gave a pep talk during the break. Act 2 was substantially stronger. Cuccioli was much better on the opener and especially the closer "As Time Goes By," though he needs to adjust to the fact that his upper range is not his friend anymore. The great Pinkins was positively triumphant, making the most of the Ethel Waters heartbreaker "Supper Time" and similarly powerful with the rueful standard "September Song."

The good vibes continued, with Skinner more playful and successful on "Love Me Or Leave Me" and bringing out the best in Rooney on their duet "It Never Was You." And a late show treat was Michael Winther and guitarist Sean Harkness duetting on a delicate, delightful "My Romance." No wonder Siegel announced he was working on an evening of Harkness duetting on guitar with a string of stars; [get on Siegel's mailing list](#) so you don't miss the announcement when details of that show in April are released. If this performance is any guide, it's going to be terrific.

And in case you haven't been paying attention, let me be clear: [You should book tickets for the next Broadway By The Year on March 28](#), which focuses on the 1950s. The legendary Marilyn Mayes will be there (along with Karen Akers and others) so you'll get to see her do three or four songs and as Johnny Carson would attest, that's a very good thing indeed.

Oh and of course [Nellie McKay](#) came back for two more numbers and charmed. She turned "You Made Me Love You" -- the Judy Garland ode to Clark Gable -- into a plug for Bernie Sanders, delivering some hilarious dialogue to Bernie in the form of a letter explaining why she's supporting him, staying in character even as laughter and applause followed her off stage. Later she performed the wistful "Autumn In New York," yet again nailing it, this time negotiating those curious lyrics that mingle optimism

with a certain forlorn air, all of it somehow making sense thanks to the sighing melody. She was quietly powerful, hushing the crowd yet again. But this time they were wider awake and applauded more, a few folk surely writing down her name so they could look it up later and dive into more of Nellie McKay's music. [You should do the same.](#)

THEATER OF 2016

[Employee Of The Year](#) (Under The Radar at Public) ***

[Germinal](#) (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

[Fiddler On The Roof](#) 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

[Skeleton Crew](#) ***

[Noises Off](#) (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

[The Grand Paradise](#) ***

[Our Mother's Brief Affair](#) * 1/2

[Something Rotten](#) ***

[Sense & Sensibility](#) (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

[Broadway & The Bard](#) * 1/2

[Prodigal Son](#) **

[A Bronx Tale: The Musical](#) **

[Buried Child](#) (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **

[Nice Fish](#) ***

[Broadway By The Year: The 1930s](#) at Town Hall ***

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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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CONVERSATIONS