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ENTERTAINMENT

Theater: *Patron Saint* A Holy Mess; Goerke Casts Big Shadow At Met

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THE PATRON SAINT OF SEA MONSTERS ** out of ****

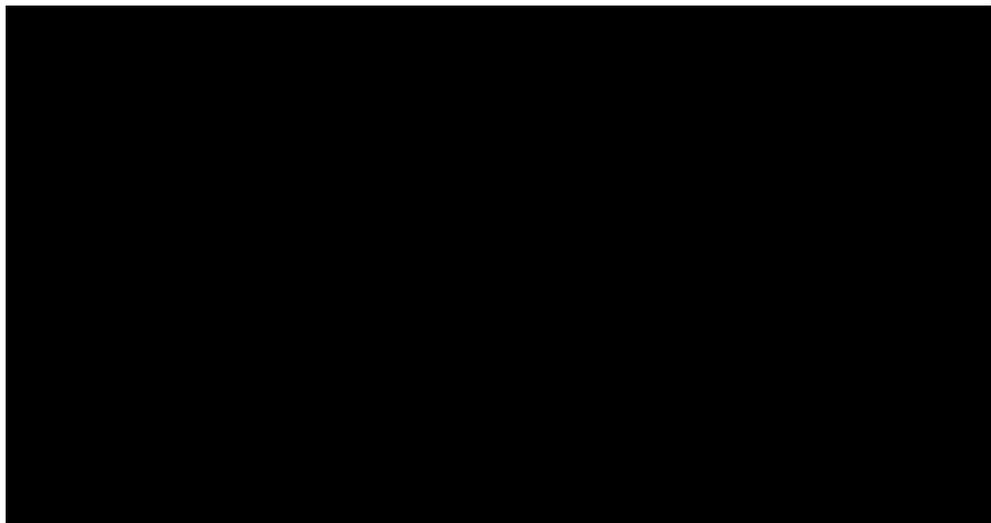
DIE FRAU OHNE SCHATTEN/THE WOMAN WITHOUT A SHADOW ** 1/2 OUT
OF ****

THE PATRON SAINT OF SEA MONSTERS ** out of ****
PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS

We could talk about the confusing, ambitious but misguided mess that is Marlane Meyer's play *The Patron Saint Of Sea Monsters*. Or we could talk about the actors that all manage to find some humor and heart throughout this disorienting show.

Let's talk about the actors. They're ensnared in a down home Gothic comedy about white trash, a pure hearted doctor with a free clinic and crimes of the heart. It begins with Candy Buckley chomping down with glee on a big chunk of scenery as the scary, hard-drinking and hard-smoking and hard-loving mother of Calvin Little (sad sack Rob Campbell). His wife is dead, seemingly at Calvin's hands though we're not sure what happened for most of the play, and he feels real bad but would rather dispose of the body than fess up to the law. His slightly psychotic brother Jack -- half-brother! insists Calvin - - okay, half-brother Jack (Danny Wolohan) takes care of the body.

We're just getting started. Aubrey Lincoln is the doctor working a local free clinic who has been obsessed with Calvin since she was a kid. When she's not praying to an obscure saint almost perfect for her situation, Aubrey is staring up the cooch of Calvin's mom, tending to his friends, ignoring the puppy love of Canadian Bill (Haynes Thigpen) and pining for Calvin. Toss in some work buddies who are worried about Calvin when he gets canned and Jack's fearful wife and you've got yourself a haphazard jumbo of plot points.



Oddly, the show helmed by director Lisa Peterson switches from broad comedy to exceptionally pointed political commentary (meant as a further joke, no doubt) to serious drama and then right back to the nutty, Christopher Durang-like stuff. Little of it works and anything that does is undercut by the stylistic switches of the scenes before and after it. Despite Heisler's best effort, Aubrey is the most frustrating of all -- she switches from a kooky, mother-dominated mouse to a pistol-packing mama to a very sensible, sober woman with a clear-eyed appraisal of her prospects. Instead of the evolution of one character, it feels more like she's playing different people, the same way most of this ensemble tackles multiple roles.

That makes it all the harder for Rob Campbell to make sense of Calvin's journey but he mostly does, with a genial, winning-loser in the manner of Steve Buscemi style that serves Calvin well since he's usually kind of trying to do the right thing.

Rachel Hauck's set is a bit of a junk shop, but manages to offer up multiple settings quickly enough, aided by the tawdry costumes of Paloma Young. The animal masks donned by actors and crew when making scene changes are about as effective in setting mood as anything else in Meyer's play, which is to say it just befuddles you.

Still, most everyone shines at certain moments, which proves how lucky Meyer is with this cast. Wolohan has hilarious intensity as Jack and Thigpen is wistful as Canadian Bill, who actually seems like a good fit for Aubrey though she and the play don't seem to know it. Buckley overacts appropriately at every opportunity and Heisler is good at her final scene, though the fight engineered between her and Calvin for some brief conflict before the closing feels forced and confusing. (What exactly are they arguing about?)

Campbell has a very effective monologue about what happened when he killed his wife that quiets the audience and achieves some genuine pathos. Like everything else here, it comes out of nowhere and kind of goes nowhere but Campbell shows faith in the story and the character and creates some magic. Actors like that are the patron saints of developing playwrights everywhere.

DIE FRAU OHNE SCHATTEN/THE WOMAN WITHOUT A SHADOW ** 1/2 OUT OF ****

METROPOLITAN OPERA

In typical operatic fashion, Richard Strauss and librettist Hugo Von Hofmannstahl turned a modest fairy tale into a four hour opera (including breaks). But *Die Frau Ohne Schatten/The Woman Without A Shadow* created an offstage bit of Cinderella going to the ball thanks to Christine Goerke's magnetic, stirring portrayal of the Dyer's Wife. A thrilling dramatic soprano, she has been a Met baby for much of her career, having been part of their young singer's program in the 1990s. But she overcame vocal issues to make a return here and when I saw the show Tuesday night tore through the house with a huge, penetrating voice that took your breath away. I'm thoroughly untutored in opera but thought, there's a Brunnhilde if I ever heard one. I planned to do a little research and make sure she was vocally suited to the part, but before I could, **lo and behold the Met has announced that Goerke will indeed sing that titanic part** when they bring back the Robert Lepage Ring Cycle in the 2018-2019 season.

Less happy news can be found elsewhere in this production, whose physical design and directorial touches undermine an excellent orchestra and generally fine singing. As I said, the story is simple. The Emperor (Torsten Kerl) once snagged the magical Empress (Anne Schwanewilms) for his wife. She used to be able to change shapes until losing her talisman. Now she is in human form but without a shadow. Her father has demanded she lay hold of a shadow in three days time or she'll be banished and her husband the Emperor will turn to stone. In desperation, she and her nurse (Ildiko Komlosi) head down

to the world of mortals where they find a generally happy couple saddened by their lack of children. The Nurse hates humans and doesn't mind meddling in their lives; she tempts the Dyer's Wife (Christine Goerke) with jewels and a fantasy lover in exchange for that precious shadow. The Empress is more loving and feels doomed. If she rejects the shadow, her husband turns to stone. If she takes the shadow, the love of the Dyer (Johan Reuter) and his wife will be destroyed forever.

It's a demanding opera, not least because Strauss has filled his score with a huge busy mass of instruments. Passage after passage is so heavily orchestrated the singers must belt out merely to be heard. However mindful conductor Vladimir Jurowski may be of the singers, the score simply must be delivered at its full-bodied might to be appreciated. That he does, with certain passages like the prayer of the night watchmen to married couples, especially lovely and a consistent engagement throughout.

Still, it does mean many of the singers are overwhelmed. Kerl in particular seemed dwarfed by the music; it didn't help that he and Schwanewilms remained so distant from each other you felt no palpable chemistry between the Emperor and the Empress. Komlosi as the bitter nurse fared little better, though she rose to the challenge during her tortured final passage where the Nurse is banished to the world of mortals for being such a pill.

Johan Reuter as the very understanding Barak, the Dyer is much better. He too is dominated by the music at times -- almost as much as he's dominated by his wife. But his acting is so strong and his magnetic attraction to his love is never in doubt. It's a credit to him and Goerke that some of the most effective moments don't involve singing at all, but merely their demonstration of pain and desire as they're batted about by forces larger than them.

So the women are the stars here. Schwanewilms is regal to a fault as the Empress. It's unfortunate that for much of act two she must remain on stage with nothing much to sing or do other than look pained. But she shines in Act Three. Here Strauss drops away the non-stop ornamentation and allows a simple pure backdrop for the Empress as she wrestles with her moral dilemma and decides beautifully that ultimately we judge ourselves and she can't bring herself to ruin other people's lives.

The production by Herbert Wernicke premiered to acclaim in 2001 but certain touches have not aged well, if they ever worked. The Emperor's beloved Falcon (Jennifer Check doing modern dance in a very abstract costume of features) looks more like something from *American Horror Story* than a winged creature. Worse, the Empress looks lovely in sparking white but she's often thrown a blue shawl over it that seems more appropriate for Stevie Nicks than this half-human, half-spirit creature. Dowdy is not a word that should spring to mind when looking at the Empress.

I faulted Komlosi earlier but she's burdened with the night's worst touch: the Nurse must lug around a large triangular magical mirror. She has to sing arias with it, waggle it at people when creating magic and tuck it under her arm when walking around. It's an absurd, ungainly distraction that serves no purpose other than to call unwelcome attention to itself. Finally, while having the Empress backdropped by a black, empty stage during her moment of crisis is apt, it seems odd to keep that stage just as bare and empty for the happy finale, especially since that drawn-out happy ending takes ages for Strauss and Hofmannstahl to wind up.

But all you'll remember anyway is Goerke. Her acting is superb throughout. And her voice! It rides the orchestra with ease, cutting throughout without ever becoming strident or piercing. Expressing anguish over her lack of children, berating her loving but suffering husband, pleading to be released from her misery -- at every stage Goerke was in full command both dramatically and vocally. Schwanewilms made her Met debut as the Empress and acquitted herself well. But she's standing in the shadow of Goerke, who is suddenly the next big star for the company, with lead roles in Strauss's *Elektra* and Puccini's *Turandot* as well as Ortrud in Wagner's *Lohengrin* circa Robert Wilson's production and of course Brunnhilde in the Ring Cycle. As the New York Times said today, it's a fairy tale ending, or rather beginning.

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 **
The Winslow Boy ***
Juno And The Paycock **
How I Learned To Drive **
Fun Home **
Two Boys at the Met **
Big Fish **
A Time To Kill * 1/2
Year Of The Rooster ***
The Snow Geese ** 1/2
A Midsummer Night's Dream ** 1/2
The Lady in Red Converses With Diablo ** 1/2
After Midnight ***
La Soiree ***
Nothing To Hide ** 1/2

*The Patron Saint Of Sea Monsters ***

Die Frau Ohne Schatten/The Woman Without A Shadow at the Met

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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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