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 Freelance writer and raconteur
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Theater: Pee-wee's Silly; Middletown Playful

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THE PEE-WEE HERMAN SHOW *** out of ****
 At the [Stephen Sondheim Theatre](#)

People always talk about Pee-wee Herman being subversive. That might have been true of his earliest take on the character. But for decades now, Pee-wee Herman has provided the best sort of entertainment for kids: smart and funny and good enough for the folks to enjoy as well. Why shouldn't Cowboy Curtis be black? Why shouldn't Miss Yvonne be the most beautiful woman in Puppetland? That's not edgy, just all-embracing. Sure, a few jokes hint at bawdiness. But just like the adult jokes in a Looney Tunes

cartoons, they go right over the kids' heads.

The biggest surprise about the [Broadway run of *The Pee-wee Herman Show*](#) is how few surprises there are in it. It is essentially a revival of the stage show that launched Paul Reubens to fame, minus the audience participation and a few of the naughtier elements. Since Captain Carl is no longer around (in deference to the late Phil Hartman), this time it's Cowboy Curtis who has a crush on Miss Yvonne. Pee-wee would like his friends to get together but all he's every really wanted to do is fly. When he gets a free wish, Pee-wee has to decide which one he'll choose. Here's the theme song to Pee-wee's Playhouse:

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In a new storyline (about one-third of the show has fresh material, I'd say), Pee-wee is also getting the Playhouse wired for the internet. Otherwise, this is delightfully familiar: the word of the day gets everyone to scream; the educational film (the one about good manners in the lunch room) remains a hoot; Chairry and Jambi and Magic Screen and the rest are all here; along with a few new twists like a talking Sham-wow.

It's common on Broadway to clap for some elaborate set or clever scene change, something I almost never do. But like everyone else, I burst into applause at the beginning when the curtain lifted and the Playhouse was onstage in all its glory. If you're a fan of the show, that alone will put a goofy grin on your face. (If only we could jump onstage!) The rest of the show is delightful, especially for the vast majority of fans like me who never got to see Pee-wee in person. Reubens is in fine form, diving into the role with his usual delirious commitment. I guess we'll have to wait for one of his feature film projects to get off the ground for an entirely new adventure. Until then, this return to the Playhouse is perfect for families and anyone who is a fan of **one of the best children's programs in TV history**.

What others are saying:

Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* said, "Nothing more and nothing less than a bubble bath of nostalgia for the many adoring fans of Pee-wee.... Pee-wee may be playing it safe, but perhaps he's playing it smart too. Nobody wants to bite into a Pop Tart or a Twinkie for a surge of Proustian recollection and have it taste like a granola bar, after all."

Elizabeth Vincentelli of the *New York Post* gave it 3 out of 4 stars and said, "To watch all this live feels supremely familiar and comforting, like eating a huge ice-cream sundae topped by a mountain of whipped cream and exploding sparklers. Still, this is essentially a nostalgic trip, and you wish Reubens and co-writer Bill Steinkellner had created more new material for the occasion. Pee-wee may be timeless, but that doesn't mean he should be stuck in the past."

David Rooney of *The Hollywood Reporter* said, "The secret word of the day is nostalgia, not rehabilitation, and the core audience's built-in affection for Pee-wee and Co. provides a useful distraction from the writing's lack of structure."

John Simon of *Bloomberg* gave it 1 1/2 out of 4 stars and said, "I don't know what is more retrograde: a 58-year-old frozen- faced buffoon or the antique antics rehashed by the script. About the kindest thing one can say is: It is at least a harmless kind of idiocy."

Dan Bacalzo of *Theatermania* said, "The secret word is "fun," and there's a lot of it to be had in this campy 90-minute bon-bon which caters to audience nostalgia."

###

MIDDLETOWN *** out of ****

At the Vineyard Theatre

Will Eno is one of the most distinctive voices to emerge in the theater in the last few years. His most recent play -- *Thom Pain (Based On Nothing)* -- was an intellectual treat that reveled in word play. At the end, I didn't feel quite as sucker-punched by the devastation and loneliness on display as I wanted. Eno isn't quite there yet, but he's clearly moving towards greatness.

The excitement of his talent brings out the best of everyone involved. The cast includes sitcom and soap stars and theater mainstays but director Ken Rus Schmoll has them so attuned to the work they feel like a

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genuine ensemble. The scenic and costume design by David Zinn (including two houses on each side, with windows to peek in at isolated people) are ideal, as is every element.

It begins with a man coming onstage to welcome us in a torrent of description: ladies and gentlemen, men and women, the bereaved and the bereft and on and on he goes, naming every possible sort of category of person you can imagine before apologizing to anyone he's left out. It sets the off-kilter tone this play maintains throughout as we get to know the people of *Middletown*. Heather Burns is a newly married arrival. Linus Roache is the bemused handyman who almost befriends her. James McMenam is the young, alcoholic loner under the watchful eye of a cop (Emmy winner Michael Park of *As The World Turns*).

The dialogue is so precise and moody, it's hard to capture the tone of the first act on paper. When Burns is in the library looking to learn something about her new town, she mentions that she and her husband are trying to start a family. McMenam, who works sometimes as a mechanic, is eavesdropping and suddenly barks out, "Start, family! Damn you!" or some such thing, as if the family were a car whose engine won't catch. Georgia Engel (multiple Emmy nominee for *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and others) is the librarian who chides his nuttiness and helps her out. The act ends with a playful scene in which five people are suddenly on stage in seats, as if they're watching this play, which they begin to discuss and dissect. It's a relief from the heightened word play that preceded it and amusing in its own right.

The second act shows Eno moving beyond the heady games he can spin off with ease. Slowly we realize how very alone these people are. The handyman slashes his wrists, even though he really doesn't think he wants to die. The housewife is pregnant and about to deliver her baby but her husband is always away on business. And the mechanic who drinks too much sinks deeper into a wry sort of despair. Everyone is good at heart and Engel knits them all together with her compassion, providing the same sweet if off-balanced charm she has for decades. McMenam was, I thought, slightly too old for his role in *Our Town* but still very good. Here he's outstanding and very charismatic as this young layabout flounders for a sense of ...purpose? Self-respect? I don't know, but seeing him cadge some pills from a doctor (Johanna Day) is a scene he makes quietly moving.

Perhaps the most exciting element of the show is the simple fact that it convinces you Eno is going to keep getting better. This is very good, but it's just the beginning.

What others are saying:

Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* said, "Mr. Eno's gift for articulating life's absurd beauty and its no less absurd horrors may be unmatched among writers of his generation. But he is more naturally adept at shaping words into sentences that shimmer with wit and meaning than at shaping scenes into a formally satisfying play."

Elizabeth Vincentelli of the *New York Post* gave it 2 1/2 stars out of 4 and said, "But sustaining this low-key, mild kookiness over two hours is hard. Under Ken Rus Schmoll's direction, the actors, while generally appealing, tend to speak in mellow monotones. This works wonders with the humor in the first act, but becomes problematic in the more serious second, which shows how loneliness is wrecking the town, and even takes a turn toward the metaphysical."

Andy Probst of *Theatermania* said, "In this immaculately staged production from director Ken Rus Schmoll, this modern-day equivalent to Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* proves to be a richly engaging and satisfying theatrical experience."

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

NOTE: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to the shows in previews with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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