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Theater: *Peter and the Starcatcher* Charms Broadway; *Ninth And Joanie* Never Lands Dramatically

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PETER AND THE STARCATCHER *** 1/2 out of
**** **NINTH AND JOANIE** * out of ****

Location! Location! Location! It's not just true about real estate. Location also matters greatly when it comes to theater. Almost every show in the world will be more enjoyable in as small a space as possible. Obviously, a

massive musical can't be squeezed into a 50 seat Off Off Off Broadway house. So we're talking as small as is practical. But the more intimate the better. *Peter and the Starcatcher* was [one of my favorite plays of 2011](#) when I saw it at the New York Theatre Workshop. It's still great fun on Broadway but I wish everyone would have the chance to see it in a smaller setting. On the other hand, *Ninth and Joanie* is playing into about as small a theater as you could ask for. But when the play is weak, all the intimacy in the world won't help.

PETER AND THE STARCATCHER *** 1/2
BROOKS ATKINSON THEATRE

Peter Pan has a curious history. He began as a minor character in a work by J.M. Barrie and then flourished with the charming and wildly popular stage play. But then Barrie deepened that success by some strange alchemy: he turned the stage play back into a novel and the story of the boy who wouldn't grow up became a profoundly moving and funny and sad reverie for childhood and the inevitable passage into the adult world for kids that every parent must prepare them for and anticipate and regret.

Now that journey has been turned on its head. Writers Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson have spun off four jokey, unofficial prequels to that novel; bestsellers all, but with none of the depth and insight of Barrie's unlikely masterpiece. But their first work -- *Peter and the Starcatcher* -- has been turned into a stage play with brilliant effect. So instead of a hit play becoming a genuinely great novel, we now have a hit novel becoming a genuinely great play.

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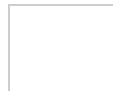
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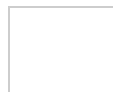
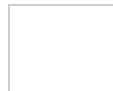


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The love that animates this adaptation by Rick Elice (so superior in every way to the book) is the love of theater. This is a hand-made play, in which the cast of 12 play dozens and dozens of characters using the most basic of props. A simple piece of rope is held at a slant and suddenly you can see characters heading down into the bowels of a ship. In another scene, that same piece of rope becomes roiling waves in the sea or a window into a cabin where two lovers are wooing. A ladder playfully levitates a little girl so she's flying, a string of flags become the mouth of a gigantic crocodile and on and on. Like *The 39 Steps* and other recent works, *Peter and the Starcatcher* demands and rewards the intelligence and imagination of the audience. It's so much fun, you'll wonder why anyone ever bothers with elaborate special effects.

The tale provides the origin story of Peter, an orphan with no name when we meet him, unless you count "Boy" or "Friendless" as names. He and his pals are being sold into white slavery when they meet Molly, the daughter of Lord Aster. Lord Aster is on a mission for the Queen and a member of the Starcatchers, a group devoted to making certain that "star stuff" (a material from outer space that can grant your every wish) never falls into the hands of villains. Many adventures ensue during which we see Peter get his first name (from Black Stache, the foppish pirate) and his last name (from a fish turned into a mermaid named Teacher). Peter becomes a leader, Stache becomes Hook and that crocodile swallows a kitchen timer.

I've already described the playfulness of the production but I should also mention it's very much in the spirit of British pantomimes, annual holiday shows (albeit ones that sometimes have elaborate sets and costumes) where families see winking versions of fairy tales sprinkled with contemporary asides such as Stache's offhand comment that star stuff was proving as "elusive as a melody in a Philip Glass opera" or Lord Aster trying to communicate with Molly and saying, "Can you hear me now?" Combine this with *One Man, Two Guvnors* and you'll have a crash course in British humor.

In a panto, the villain is lustily booed and both he and/or a major female character are played by famous male actors. (The British do love their drag.) In another nice reversal, *Peter and the Starcatcher* might just turn Christian Borle (of TV's *Smash*) into a theater star. He plays Stache/Hook with wonderful verve. Any fears that Borle might go too far over the top on Broadway are soon allayed. Borle delivers the scenery chewing goods in a climactic scene but for most of the show he triumphs with subtle panache, albeit subtlety in the service of broad humor.

He is matched by two excellent co-stars, just as Stache needs Pan to become a great villain. Adam Chanler-Berat presents just the right combination of defensiveness and slight befuddlement (must adults *always* lie?) that can't quite hide his innate sweetness. But the show's real secret weapon is Celia Keenan-Bolger as our heroine Molly. She plays the plucky girl with exactly the right sort of brio and self-confidence and keeps the action centered in real human emotion. Her deadpan delivery also nails some of the best lines of the show. Little boys might fantasize about being Peter, but little girls can and should become like Molly as best they can. Every element is wonderful and the direction by Roger Rees and Alex Timbers is a marvel.

Now here's the catch. What you've just read is mostly my original experience of seeing *Peter And The Starcatcher* Off Broadway. I've just seen it again on Broadway and I wrestled whether to lower the rating from 3 1/2 stars to just 3 stars. That seemed churlish in the face of such a charming success. But there's no question that the experience of seeing it is lessened a tad on Broadway.

They didn't go crazy, but the set by Donyale Werle is slightly more substantial here I think, when it wasn't necessary in the least and in fact goes against the spirit of the show. All the tech elements are superb -- from the pitch-perfect costumes by Paloma Young and the ever-inventive lighting by Jeff



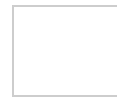
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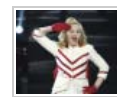


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Croiter to the sound design by Darron L. West. But I refer to the sound elements, not the sound mix. On Broadway, playing to a larger house means more of the dialogue was a bit garbled. In the smaller setting, the show was effortless. On Broadway one must struggle a bit to follow what's being said in the busier scenes. It doesn't really matter -- you can always follow what's going on and you're just as likely to miss a line because people are still laughing rather than acoustic issues. Further, some of the playful touches -- like the rope becoming a window into a cabin where characters are squeezed together -- seemed more magical in the smaller setting. They still work but the charm is ever so slightly less present.

If I could take you back in time to see it in that smaller setting, would I? Absolutely. Should you go today? Absolutely. If you missed it the first time around, catch it while you can. Arnie Burton's multiple characters (especially Mrs. Bumbrake) are one of the highlights of the current season, as is Kevin Del Aguila's turn as Smee. His chemistry with Borle is a key reason why *Stache* is such a success and defines the very essence of good supporting work. The rest of the cast is equally hard-working and funny. This is a true ensemble. In a season of great plays -- including *Tribes*, *Sons Of The Prophet* and *Clybourne Park* -- *Peter And The Starcatcher* still shines. Just make sure you sit as close as you can; you want to be as near to the 'star stuff' of this cast and this production as possible.

***NINTH AND JOANIE* ***
BANK STREET THEATER

When you're seeing a play that doesn't work, it can be exhausting. It's not like seeing a movie that doesn't work. You're actually in the same space as actors who are struggling and giving their all. It's not an easy task to drain your heart even when a play is good (imagine the exhaustion Philip Seymour Hoffman and Andrew Garfield must feel every night after *Death Of A Salesman*). But it's just as hard if not harder when a play isn't working. The audience struggles to maintain focus and give the actors the benefit of their energy and attention while the cast struggles to find a moment of grace to make the evening meaningful.

Such, unfortunately, are the thoughts that arise when seeing *Ninth and Joanie*, a new drama by Brett C. Leonard. It's a dour story set in Philadelphia in 1986, where Michael (Dominic Fumusa) has sunk into bitter despair over the death of his wife and daughter. In the first act -- which begins with an exceptionally long period of silence as characters enter and settle down for the night in a clearly familiar routine -- we see Michael and his beaten down son Rocco (Kevin Corrigan) back from what turns out to be the funeral of Michael's wife. His disdain for the hapless Rocco is painful, while Rocco sits around bruised and battered (he's gone from a fighter to a guy who just goads people to beat him up and never hits back), playing with a Ouija board and claiming he's seen the ghost of his little sister.

Their sad dance is interrupted by the appearance of Charlie (playwright and actor Bob Glaudini), the oldest son who got out of prison after killing the drunk driver that killed his little sister. Charlie couldn't bring himself to attend his mother's funeral because his confession of being a killer drove her to suicide. Got all that? The daughter is killed by a drunk driver. The eldest son kills him and goes to prison. The mother slits her own throat in despair. The father, a mobbed up figure of some sort, drinks himself into oblivion and runs down everyone in sight, though that seems to have been his *modus operandi* even before death descended on their household.

Act Two introduces us to Charlie's wife Isabella (Rosal Colon) and son (Samuel Mercedes), with the racist Michael behaving in an entirely despicable fashion. Pretty it isn't. It's a bleak and, more to the point, an unilluminating story. Glaudini is forced to dance as fast as he can since in his brief scene he must plumb despair and take desperate action. Corrigan is a very good actor who here spends scene after scene pathetically playing with his Ouija board or miming his old boxing moves. I long to see him in a leading role he can shine on. Colon makes a good impression as a woman just as steely as any of the men. Fumusa has the worst of it as the inert, unrevealing Michael. The character's just a type and Fumusa can't bring him to life.

Director Mark Wing-Davey also struggles with a text that doesn't reward the effort, to the point where the awkward finale didn't even seem to quite end as the lights came up and characters moved around in the background. The show could have ended at almost any point and it wouldn't have surprised me since the show was going nowhere emotionally. But it's always telling when an audience isn't even certain the play has finished.

I'm tempted to say the set design by David Meyer is the show's strongest asset. Its plastic-covered couch and rundown flooring, the flimsy cardboard box containing the Ouija set and the bulky wooden stereo console all tell more of a story than the play. However, I was acutely aware of being ideally seated to appreciate it. The set features a living room and behind it a foyer and desk. When someone was in that area, I think many of the audience members on the sides wouldn't have a clue as to what was happening. And behind *that* is a window looking into a kitchen. And when a character is in there, they're completely invisible to a good third of the audience, leaving them utterly in the dark. Maybe that's fitting, since the heart of the play was never visible no matter where you were sitting.

The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four-star scale)



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Now. Here. This. * 1/2
Painting Churches * 1/2
Peter And The Starcatcher *** 1/2
Pigpen's The Nightmare Story *** 1/2
Once *** 1/2
Once on Broadway ****

Olive and The Bitter Herbs ** 1/2
On A Clear Day You Can See Forever * 1/2
One Arm ***
Other Desert Cities on Broadway ** 1/2
Private Lives **
Queen Of The Mist ** 1/2
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Regrets * 1/2
Relatively Speaking * 1/2
Richard III w Kevin Spacey at BAM ***
The Road To Mecca ** 1/2
Samuel & Alasdair: A Personal History Of The Robot War ** 1/2
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Silence! The Musical * 1/2
69 Degrees South * 1/2
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Sons Of The Prophet *** 1/2
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Wit ** 1/2
Zarkana **

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Crazy, Just Like Me ***
Cyclops: A Rock Opera *
Ennio: The Living Paper Cartoon ** 1/2
F---ing Hipsters **
Ghostlight **
Gotta Getta Girl ** 1/2 for staged reading
Greenwood *
Jack Perry Is Alive (And Dating) * 1/2
Kiki Baby ** 1/2
Kissless * 1/2
Madame X **
The Pigeon Boys ***
Time Between Us * 1/2
Tut **

FRINGEFEST NYC 2011

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Books On Tape ** 1/2
Civilian **
Hard Travelin' With Woody ***
Leonard Cohen Koans *** 1/2
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Paper Cuts ***
Parker & Dizzy's Fabulous Journey To The End Of The Rainbow ** 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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Andrea Wales
8 Fans

03:36 PM on 04/21/2012

You know - I don't mind a bad review, but I do mind when a critic who is given the playbill and has supposedly seen the play gets the characters mixed up. For your information...Michael is the son who has been to jail and returns home and Charlie is the father whose daughter is killed and whose wife kills herself...Like I said, don't mind a bad review, but get your facts straight..Its not that hard.

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Jerry Ruiz
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02:41 PM on 04/20/2012

Mr Giltz, you have your actors mixed up. Bob Gladini plays the father (Charlie) and Dominic Fumusa plays the son, Michael.

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August 30, 2012

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SUMMER SHORTS SERIES B ** out of ****
BULLET FOR ADOLF * out of ****

SUMMER SHORTS SERIES B ** out of ****
59 E 59

Theatrical shorts are a very forgiving format. When you're seeing three or four brief plays in an evening, you're often quite friendly. You don't dread a short play that doesn't immediately grab you -- hey, maybe it will get better and even if it doesn't, in 25 minutes you'll be watching something else! Perhaps that explains why I didn't mind this slight evening of playlets from artists of considerable talent.

Paul Rudnick provides a monologue for the very talented Peter Bartlett called "Cabin Pressure." Bartlett plays a flight attendant giving a speech when he receives the Medal of Freedom from the President for foiling a terrorist. We soon learn the really annoying passenger wasn't the terrorist but a hedge fund manager who kept being pushy and demanding and rude. We also learn our hero's partner is an out of work cake decorator who goes to AA and waves his hand whenever the flight attendant digresses, which is about once or twice a sentence. Oh, there are amusing lines. Rudnick is incapable of delivering a piece without some amusing lines and Bartlett squeezes every bit of humor out of it with impeccable timing. Thanking this and that person and "whomever is managing Lindsay Lohan" may be sort of amusing, but Rudnick can do this sort of thing in his sleep. And compared to his far superior work in the recent *Standing On Ceremony* collection of one-acts about gay marriage, this falls short. Still, there are worse ways of spending an evening than enjoying Bartlett nail his lines.

"Love and Real Estate" is a curious musical by two talents new to me. Sam Davis (music) is a top arranger and conductor with some intriguing composing work under his belt (like the upcoming *Bunnica*.) Sean Hartley (book and lyrics) has delivered some acclaimed work I didn't get a chance to see. This tale -- very vaguely linked to "The Three Little Pigs" -- is about three sisters who move to New York City and are preyed upon by a charming wolf who desires not their flesh but their fabulous apartments. (Any New Yorker can relate.) It's a rather static affair that heads exactly where you think it will, with a capable cast. They're all overshadowed by Edward Hibbert who plays the narrator and delivers the one distinctive number, a novelty piece called "Love and Real Estate" with his usual aplomb.

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"The Furies" is the final and least satisfying piece. However it also brings up the vagaries of live theater and small spaces. For some reason, multiple audience members in the back few rows seemed to exit and enter during this piece, creating a constant source of tension and interruption. Maybe that explains why the actors never seemed to find their rhythm in this moribund piece about an older man trying to break some news to an erstwhile boyfriend, who is shadowed by his angry, defiant sister. All three are distinct types and remain exactly true to form from beginning to end. The sister (Alicia Goranson) whispers into her brother's ear throughout until the finale where she lets loose with a long monologue about how she will make the older man's life miserable if he's lying to them. Unfortunately, that tirade is so repetitive and dull you don't feel the anger of a fury, just an impatience for something to happen you couldn't see a mile off. And while one must remember the especially fidgety audience for this particular performance, Victor Slezak as the older man was notably stumbling over his lines all night long.

And yet for all that, because it was a night of shorts and they were blessedly brief and the whole affair was over in 90 minutes, the evening was far less of a drag than it might have been at a single show of similar quality. A second set of shorts called Series A is also in rotation and reportedly received significantly kinder reviews.

BULLET FOR ADOLF * out of **** **NEW WORLD STAGES**

It would be nice to report that the talented performer Woody Harrelson's work as a co-writer and director was as his good as his acting. That ain't gonna happen but as flat as this comic drama fails, it is not faint praise to say it fails memorably and completely. It falls on its face but at least it *falls* rather than just sitting there, like so many other tepid tales. And as a director, Harrelson wisely encourages his actors to act their asses off. If it isn't working, you might as well let loose and make as much noise as possible.

The story is drawn very, very loosely from his days in construction before he made it big and is co-written with a buddy from those days, Frankie Hyman. It's set in 1983 as the pop music that blares loudly throughout the theater before the show begins makes abundantly clear. (Again, turn it up! What the hell!) Then come a barrage of clips containing pop cultural moments and highlights of that era, ranging from MTV to AIDS to Ronald Reagan and so on. At first it seemed desperate. Were they that worried we'd forget what year the play was set? But as the show progressed, the well-chosen barrage of clips proved the most entertaining segment so I actually looked forward to them.

The storylines hardly bear repeating since they're so confusing and convoluted. They seem like entirely separate tales; when the characters start bumping into each other, it's almost a shock. You've got a couple of guys working on a construction site for a dour German. One of them is fired and this dude, who insists he be called the "Dago-Czech" and dubs himself a brother to boot, declares he will get revenge. Actor Lee Osorio plays him with red meat verve; if Harrelson told the rest to turn it up to 11, Osorio decided 22 would be twice as good. Again, why not?

Then you've got one of the construction guys with a mild history of embezzlement named Frankie. He goes on a job interview and rather oddly starts to hit on the beautiful woman he's hoping to work for, raving about the sunset, barely bothering to describe his credentials before asking her on a date and so on. It's hard to describe how awkwardly unconvincing all this is. You think for a while they're trying for a certain tone or heightened reality or maybe Harrelson has some grander purpose, but in fact it's just weirdly off on every level. Throw in an 18 year old girl, a guy who may or may not be closeted and that German's antique Luger which was used to attempt an assassination of the Fuhrer and you've got yourself a play. Sort of. At least, the gun goes missing.

The first act ends with a frantic dinner party. Racial taunts are tossed out and dialogue is traded but none of it makes any sense -- none of it ever does. At one point a character laments the Germans doing him wrong and asks if it's all some sort of Teutonic plot. To which the 18 year old girl responds apropos of nothing that he better stop treating her like a little kid. Huh? You'll be saying that a lot if you go see *Bullet For Adolf*.

Despite the utter lack of logic here, the actors soldier on. The women come off better than the men, with Marsha Stephanie Blake delivering some humor as the no-nonsense Shareeta. The talented Shamika Cotton (such a hateful mother in *The Wire*) has an appealing presence. And Shannon Garland almost makes some sense out of that 18 year old kid. The men have less success, with Tyler Jacob Rollinson as Frankie and Nick Wyman as Jurgen the German coming off best. And Imaginary Media delivered the video montages that are peppered throughout. I didn't think I wanted to see a string of old soda commercials, but darned if seeing Telly Savalas plug a pop didn't make me laugh.

Here's Woody Harrelson chatting about the play on *The View*.



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BRING IT ON: THE MUSICAL ** out of ****
INTO THE WOODS ** 1/2 out of ****

BRING IT ON: THE MUSICAL ** out of ****
ST. JAMES THEATRE

This is the show *Lysistrata Jones* hoped to be: a frothy high school musical that audiences embraced. Neither show is genuinely good, but at least *Bring It On* is painless in its anonymity. Plus, it can ignore brickbats since the show has just extended its "limited" run through January of 2013.

It's based on the 2000 hit film about high school cheerleaders that rather inexplicably spawned four direct to DVD sequels. This musical spin on the story is a mishmash of typical high school plots: our heroine Campbell (Taylor Louderman) yearns to lead her squad to another national championship. But redistricting forces her to switch schools in her senior year and head to the "scary" Jackson school filled with metal detectors and crews that dance at parties but think cheerleading is lame. Campbell must make new friends, whip stylish hip-hop dancers into savvy cheerleading professionals, win a national championship and oh my gosh, that Latino boy is really cute and I think he likes her!

Anyone who has ever watched the national cheerleading competitions on ESPN knows those kids can wow an audience with their high flying stunts. Director and choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler naturally draws upon those stunts to send dancers flying high into the air to juice up the audience and give a nice little spin to the typical Broadway moves. The all-star team behind the scenes includes Jeff Whitty of *Avenue Q* on the book, Tom Kitt of *Next To Normal* working on the music with Lin-Manuel Miranda of *In The Heights*, and Amanda Green working with Miranda on the lyrics. All pros, all with some great credits to their name and none of it remotely reflected in the by-the-numbers material here.

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In the spirit of cheerleading and emphasizing the positive, I'll focus on moments and performances that worked. Miranda is probably responsible for the rare feat of bringing some modestly effective rap to Broadway -- two solos by Nicolas Womack as Twig actually have a little verve and snap. Gregory Haney may have the awfully cliched role of the strong, no-nonsense transvestite but that doesn't him from nailing his lines (and his dance moves) and actually delivering some genuine laughs thanks to his timing. (However, the final, lazy gay twist -- just to titillate audiences -- is tiresome even if it does give his character of La Cienega a kiss.) Similarly, Kate Rockwell makes the most of the one-note blonde Skylar, a self-absorbed competitor of Campbell's.

Neil Haskell is appropriately hunky as Campbell's first boyfriend, though he's given virtually nothing to do. Jason Gotay has a thin voice but a lot of presence that makes him appealing as Campbell's new flame. I really disliked the written character of Bridget, the chubby kid with low self-esteem who blossoms at the new school. But Ryann Redmond certainly tackled it unabashedly. I really can't praise Taylor Louderman, who left no impression as Campbell, but I certainly wouldn't criticize her either. The role is too bland and filled with mushy inspirational tunes like "What I Was Born To Do" and "One Perfect Moment" to give anyone much of a chance. She certainly worked hard and smiled throughout, just like a good cheerleader

But the real find is Adrienne Warren as Danielle, the leader of the dance crew at the new school who warily trusts Campbell. Warren has terrific presence and made her equally anonymous role a living, breathing character we immediately understood, believed in and cared about. All in all, the good casting of Rachel Hoffman and Telsey + Company are the main reason *Bring It On* isn't the train wreck it might have been.

I wasn't wowed by the dance routines at the finale but they certainly incorporated what you'd expect. I thought Blankenbuehler's most successful work was for "Friday Night Jackson." The hip hop moves were fun, a few nifty touches (like having Jason Gotay as Randall "swipe" aside dancers to get a better look at Campbell) were clever and the sight of our heroine dancing around in a leprechaun suit (a bit of hazing on the part of Danielle) was funny and offbeat. Seeing Gotay get all romantic while staring lovingly at the leprechaun mascot felt like a brief, weird moment from a very different, far more original show.

INTO THE WOODS ** 1/2 out of ****
[DELACORTE THEATER IN CENTRAL PARK](#)

Let's not go overboard because of disappointment. The free plays that comprise Shakespeare in the Park are invariably worthwhile and this production of Stephen Sondheim's *Into The Woods* is no exception. Anyone lucky enough to wait in line or otherwise snag a ticket will get to see a fully realized production under the stars with top Broadway talent and some Hollywood actors enjoying a summer on-stage. A pleasant time will be had by all and you can bring the kids since it's not *Macbeth* we're talking about but a musical that subverts the fairy tales we all know with wit and emotion.

Still, it's hard not to be heartbroken since the Public Theater's announcement of an open-air production of *Into The Woods* had all the makings of a revelation a la *Hair*. That musical was an ideal combination of setting and show and the feeling that *Into The Woods* might be similarly ideal was tempting. It was overseen by director Timothy Sheader and co-director and movement director Liam Steel, who both did the same honors for a London open air production in Regent's Park that was critically acclaimed.

In the first act we see characters from all sorts of fairy tales -- Jack of Jack and the Beanstalk, Rapunzel, Cinderella and so on crossing paths while pursuing their fates. At the finale, they've all reached their dreams though we sense those dreams may prove unsatisfying. Act two shows what happens after the "happy ever after" as the real world intrudes on a prince and his bride, a boy and his harp and a witch who has regained her beauty and lost her power. The cast includes the great Donna Murphy as the Witch, the talented Denis O'Hare as the Baker and Hollywood's Amy Adams venturing onto the stage as his wife. What could go wrong?

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Quite a bit actually. The scenic design by John Lee Beatty and Soutra Gilmour is a busy, heavy-handed tree fort that looks like something out of *Swiss Family Robinson*. I eyed it warily and the cast must have done the same. Entering and exiting the stage proved a laborious affair, with actors winding their way in and out of the roots of the tree, often visible by the audience long after their characters were meant to be out of sight. Sheader seemed to have no idea what to do with it all, jamming the cast onto a narrow stairway at one point, lining them up on another and generally making us feel the set was in the way rather than an organic part of the world we were in.

I assume the costumes nod to the British production since the punky look of the evil stepmother and her daughter and numerous other touches (like the garb of Little Red) have what I can only describe as a very distinctive British take on those tropes, a sensibility I've often found rather narrow and uninteresting. The costumer is actually Emily Rebholz who has done acclaimed work on *Bloody, Bloody Andrew Jackson* and other shows and for all I know she never saw a single photo of the UK production but there you are. Even when the designs worked (such as the Witch's costume that made her seem half-tree), it's spoiled by a wig of dreadlocks by Leah Loukas that was far too much of a punchline for me. Ditto the huge pile of hair on Adams as the Baker's wife which didn't quite hint at the heightened reality of fairy tales but merely looked jokey. The puppetry by Rachael Canning for the giant and other bits was quite clever and effective.

In a subtle way, the most harmful choice of all was to frame the show by having a little boy fight with his father and then run away and spend the night in the woods. The story we see is really the made-up tale of that boy (an affable Jack Broderick). It's a small but devastatingly wrong-minded change. The boy takes some dolls in hand and starts telling the tale. But as little boys will, he seems to randomly add in touches of mayhem and destruction. The brilliance of *Into The Woods* was how Sondheim injected genuine emotion and real consequences for what we blithely dismissed as fairy tales. People die in fairy tales all the time but Sondheim forces us to confront that reality. When the Giant describes what Jack did to her family, how he betrayed their trust, stole from them and killed her husband, you have to admit she's got an excellent reason to want revenge.

But the little boy Narrator undercuts all that. A kid telling a made-up story might suddenly say, "And then Godzilla showed up and trampled the village to pieces!" and gleefully smash the toys around. That's a very different sensibility from Sondheim's desire to show these people not as puppets reenacting a fable but flesh and blood characters who can love and die and kill and grieve over all those actions. This show's framing device allows us to disconnect from all that -- it's just a story and their actions don't have consequences, they're just the whims of a boy.

Amidst all this wrong-headedness, we still have talented actors and a glorious score. The first act usually hurtles along to its breathless conclusion, so perfectly constructed it's one of the glories of musical theater. This production may sort of trudge along but that can't completely undercut the beauty and hummability of the songs. (The idea that Sondheim's scores don't deliver catchy melodies is patently absurd and anyone who sees this show and hums "Into the woods! Into the woods! Into the woods! I wish!" for days after can attest to it.)

O'Hare and Adams have nice chemistry as the childless Baker and his wife. Her voice is untutored but pleasant and she acts her way nicely through the part. Adams has presence and charm to spare, scoring especially when she gets to romp with one of the Princes (an amusing Ivan Hernandez). O'Hare stumbles a bit on his big solo number but the decision to cast a non-singer really hurts on the tune "No One Is Alone" with Jessie Mueller as Cinderella. That song is one of the most aching, lovely tunes imaginable. It was a daunting prospect to begin with for O'Hare, but the disastrous staging has him high up in a tree with Jack, miles away from Cinderella and completely out of her sight line. O'Hare must awkwardly do the best he can while Mueller (who scores very nicely in her role) tries her best to ease him along. Standing side by side it would have been hard for O'Hare but Sheader really shouldn't have thrown more obstacles in his way. It turns the emotional high point of the show into a flop.

Murphy is a pro as the Witch, having fun with the comic moments, plumbing the depths of emotion for the heartrending scenes and of course singing beautifully. She turns the 11 o'clock number "Last Midnight" (which is the one tune in the show I've never quite taken to heart; it wants too much to be an 11 o'clock number) into a peak. Conversely, I remember Gideon Glick fondly from *Wild Animals You Should Know* but he doesn't strike the right note as Jack. In many ways, Jack can be the driving character among this large cast; here he seems just one of many.

If there's a triumph, it's Sarah Stiles as Little Red, who has a blast with that giggly girl on the verge of puberty. Her every appearance is a welcome reminder of what this show can be: not family friendly fare as such, but a sophisticated, witty, sexy and real re-imagining of these characters from cardboard cut-outs to flesh and blood people. I've seen the Broadway revival, this open air production, smaller takes on it and heard for years about a potential feature film. None truly did the work justice. As for that ideal performance of *Into The Woods*, I'll continue to hope and say, "I wish!"

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Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2

How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2

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Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2

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Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2

Living With Henry (NYMF) *

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The Last Smoker In America **

Gore Vidal's The Best Man (w new cast) ***

Into The Woods at Delacorte ** 1/2

Bring It On: The Musical **

Bullet For Adolf *

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