



Theater: "Psycho" Not So Killer; Sweet "Waitress"



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**AMERICAN PSYCHO** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**WAITRESS** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

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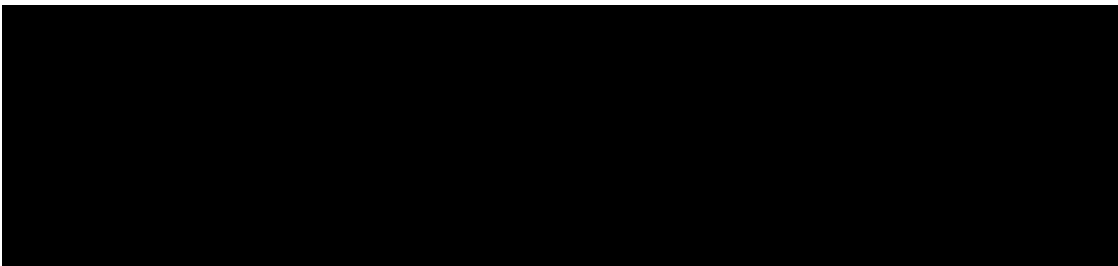
**GERALD SCHOENFELD THEATRE**

It's almost quaint to remember the furor that greeted Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* when it was first published. Though clearly a brand-name stuffed satire, its violent imagery was seen as misogynistic in the extreme. Now it's on Broadway with hard bodies and blood splatters on full display, with dismemberment following depictions of all sorts of sexual combinations and while older audiences may not be quite ready for it, they certainly won't be shocked or surprised.

Like the admired film starring Christian Bale, this musical elevates the one-note satire of the novel into something more ambitious and daring. Especially in the music, it aims high. The show misses the tone entirely that might have pulled this off, but there's no question everyone is trying.

The story is simple, in a way. Patrick Bateman (embodied by Benjamin Walker) is a Wall Street young gun during the go-go days of the late 1980s. He seems to have it all, including a rail-thin girlfriend, big salary, glossy lifestyle, razor sharp good looks and the adoration and envy of all. But Bateman himself is wracked with envy, always worried about having the right business card, the right table at the right restaurant and perhaps just a teensy bit concerned about the violent thoughts that overwhelm him eighteen times an hour.

He glides through work and play, avoiding commitment to anyone or anything, buying the proper skin care products, maintaining his body and slowly graduating from thinking violent thoughts to bruising prostitutes to stabbing homeless people no one will miss and finally to offing coworkers who are competition for the best clients. Or is he? Bateman may be doing all of this or he may just be fantasizing about it. Does anyone really care if he's a monster? I mean, he looks so good....





Many things go wrong in telling this story, not least the fact that it simply may not be suited to the stage. In any case, this Bateman seems far more of a pushover than the Bale version from the film. He seems vulnerable and a little pathetic, crumpling at the sight of a better business card, rather than keeping those feelings tamped down tight. Obviously, we're glimpsing his inner struggles but it's more compelling to sense those struggles rather than see them played out. When he's demonstrably wiggled out by nothing or nerdy or just plain pathetic, it makes our would-be serial killer far less threatening.

Another bad choice was the broad comedy performances of Bateman's girlfriend (Helene York) and best friend (played by Theo Stockman, not that Bates really has friends). They're both quite funny in the parts but this aggressive farcical style makes the whole show a bit of a joke, which also declaws the bubbling violence of Patrick Bateman. Since he inhabits such a fake world of shtick, his tearing it apart holds no danger for us.

The sleek look, the 80s choreography on a bad trip of Lynne Page and especially the songs and score of Duncan Sheik are more on point. Sheik combines original songs done in a style that echoes and slowly transmutes the pop sound of that era into something closer to the theatrical form. Intriguingly, he also takes specific pop songs and gives them new settings and arrangements. This works a charm early on, with Tears For Fears' "Everybody Wants To Rule The World," New Order's "True Faith" and the Phil Collins hit "In The Air Tonight" all given new resonance when the specific lyrics Sheik uses are placed in this context. Then he doubles down by simply using the actual recording of Huey Lewis and the News singing "Hip To Be Square" in the climax of the first act.

All this works so interestingly, one can't help thinking perhaps the entire score should have been constructed this way. (I say that as an ardent fan of Sheik's work both on *Spring Awakening* and on other theatrical works he's composed and his numerous excellent pop albums.) In fairness, I look forward to absorbing the score after repeated listens. But the truth is that the restructuring of those pop tunes is dropped for most of act two, the originals don't at first blush cut so deep and the use of Human League's "Don't You Want Me" at the climax is disastrous. The lyrics have no impact and make no sense in this context, really. It's jarring and ineffective just when the show needs genuine emotion more than ever.

Intellectually, I appreciated what Sheik was going for. But emotionally, I felt little despite a game cast. Walker was key to *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* and he surely has the matinee idol good looks that are almost *too*

perfect which works for our protagonist. If he feels a little...bland, I'm assuming that's the empty shell of a man that is Patrick Bateman and wait to see Walker given a chance to play someone with flesh and blood rather than a caricature. Alice Ripley is simply wasted in various roles. But in smaller parts that are played more seriously (and thus are funnier and more effective), I found Drew Moerlien as bete noir Paul Owen and Dave Thomas Brown as hanger-on David Van Patten very compelling. Similarly, Jennifer Damiano plays an honest to goodness actual person as Bateman's secretary and that too makes her immediately more interesting than the cartoon targets usually on display.

The book of Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa lets Sheik down. It's too jokey, too broad, too faithful in its way to the book and movie without reimagining how the work might play onstage. One problem: Patrick Bateman holds the stage too much. Addressing the audience and rattling off name brand products just isn't very compelling. We should be wondering what he's really thinking under that sleek surface, not feeling bored as he unloads his emotional baggage every five minutes.

It's useful to note some of the few scenes that actually do work. In the show's most memorable moment of tension and emotion, Bateman is alone with his secretary, a woman who pines for him. (God knows why but she thinks he's sweet, which makes us doubt her taste in men rather than seeing Bateman in a new light.) They're in his apartment and his homicidal feelings are bubbling up and while he wrestles with whether to open himself up emotionally or open her up *literally* there's actually something at stake. In another lighter scene, Bateman and his friends are sunning themselves and debating the merits of various forms of bottled water. This exchange is intentionally banal and amusingly specific, like so much of Ellis's novel. Somehow, with a group of people bantering with one another, their vapidty and the sting of the novel comes across far better than having Bateman alone and holding forth in a vacuum. Even monsters need friends, apparently, and are more interesting for it.

**WAITRESS** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

### **BROOKS ATKINSON THEATRE**

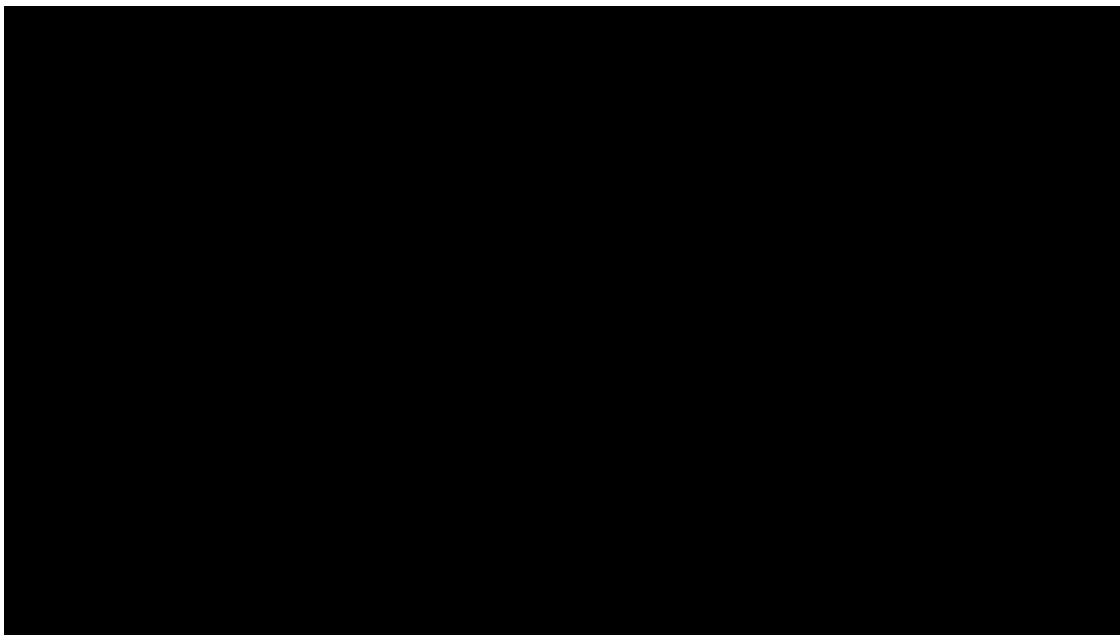
Somehow, I never saw the much admired indie film written by Adrienne Shelly that this new musical is based on. However, I imagine it had a more consistent tone than this unfocused show which begins with the rat-a-tat rhythms of an episode of the sitcom *Alice*, veers into more adult territory and then u-turns into a wish fulfillment fantasy at the end with an oddly un-empowering twist for our heroine. Thanks to a game cast, the immense appeal of Tony winner Jessie Mueller and some good songs by Sara Bareilles, it manages to sate your hunger for a new musical even as it doesn't quite succeed as well as it should.

The story is simple. Jenna (Mueller) is a waitress in a small town. She's got a hateful husband named Earl (Nick Cordero) and an unhappy life. Despite the constant urging of her friends, Jenna is too scared to leave him and start a new life. But boy can she bake pies! Maybe, just maybe, a big pie baking competition with a juicy big chunk of cash for the winner can be her way out.

Along the way, she'll get pregnant, have an affair with the affable new doctor in town (Drew Gehling) and see both her fellow waitresses find their own solace in the arms of others. But will she find the strength to break free? You'd certainly expect so in a show led by an all female creative team led by director Diane Paulus and composer and lyricist Sara Bareilles. The deflating truth is that they sort of let Jenna down.

As mentioned, the story begins with one-liner after another, usually dished up by the big-boned gal Becky

(Keala Settle) and served to the short order cook Cal (Eric Anderson). And no points for figuring out what might be happening between the two people who argue the most, folks. But the story gets darker as we realize Jenna's husband isn't just controlling but genuinely abusive. Happily, the cliché of a baby changing everything comes into play since Jenna is scared by the coming responsibility but also sees her pregnancy as a kick in the pants. If she can't be brave for herself, maybe she can be brave for the child to be.



I was really looking forward to this show. The Sara Bareilles album containing some songs she wrote for *Waitress* was one of my favorites of 2015. The simple recurring lyric of ingredients ("sugar...butter...flour") has been in my head for ages. The tunes really defined characters or seemed to push a storyline further. When a show has a good score, you're halfway there. However, I think Bareilles made a mistake in doing the orchestrations herself. (Arrangements are by Nadia DiGiullonardo.) Despite my strong familiarity with many of the songs, I had a lot of trouble understanding the lyrics. (My guest had that problem, times ten.) It's something I rarely encounter in a Broadway show. I think it's a combination of Bareilles not typically writing for other voices, not doing orchestrations, the particular demands of a pop song recorded on an album versus lyrics that must be understood right away in a show, the presence of the band onstage and the sound design of Jonathan Deans. Simply not being able to hear the lyrics properly is an almost insurmountable stumbling block. It reached a climax with the show's eleven o'clock number "She Used To Be Mine." I literally couldn't follow what Jenna was singing about or what Bareilles was trying to illuminate or get across -- but in this case it wasn't exactly due to audio problems but a vagueness to the lyrics that left me confused about what exactly our heroine was getting at. I've become a fan of Bareilles thanks to the *Waitress* album she recorded and believe she has the makings of a musical composer. But all these factors conspired against showing the songs off at their best.

That's far from the only problem. The choreography of Lorin Latarro is undistinguished and the set design of Scott Pask is serviceable but never more (though the backdrops create a disarming realism that's right for this

story). The choice of having the band onstage is unsatisfying. They just seem in the way. Not to get all John Doyle on them, but having more of a sense of the band being the customers might have been a better way to go.

But the main problem after the inability to actually hear the songs is the book of Jessie Nelson. About halfway through the show they find the right tone: a more adult take on romance and lost opportunities. Various characters are having sex and it's not necessarily with their one true love. They're unapologetically finding solace in sex, not romance. It's a rather more mature and nuanced take than we expected from the jokey start, but a valid one for people trapped in unsatisfying circumstances. That seems truest to the story of a woman abused by her husband and struggling to break free. Yet *Waitress* rarely stays on this level.

Rather disappointingly, *Waitress* doesn't even dare to imagine a realistic awakening for Jenna. We expect to watch a woman blossom into a positive self image thanks to a new passion or be inspired by the responsibilities of motherhood or even simply gain confidence thanks to her genuine talent with baking. Instead, she's rescued by a fairy godfather of a sort.

And yet. And yet, *Waitress* does have some very appealing tunes. And it can boast a very talented cast. Cordero (of *A Bronx Tale* and *Bullets Over Broadway*) lets the hateful Cal be a real lowlife rather than a broad caricature and he's all the scarier and sadder for it. Settle may be handed two-bit one-liners but she zings them as best she can. And out of nowhere the romances gain momentum. Dawn (Kimiko Glenn) is a shy wallflower but she blossoms when finding her soulmate online, a man named Ogie. Christopher Fitzgerald stops the show as that nerdy, history buff with a poetic heart determined not to let Dawn get away from him. It's no surprise that the talented Dakin Matthews nails his smaller turn as the grumpy customer Joe with charm and wit. Toss in appealing chemistry between Jenna and Dr. Pomatter and you've got a lot of fun on tap.

So why did they (presumably) stick so close to the film that Dr. Pomatter is also cheating on his wife? We know Jenna has good reason but his cheating feels like a bridge too far, especially since it ultimately seems so unjustified. And why couldn't Jenna grow a little bit scene by scene rather than switching from doormat to triumphant winner all in the blink of an eye? And will someone apologize to Charity Angél Dawson for being saddled with a horribly cliched role of a tut-tutting, mumbling, sassy nurse? She does what she can with the part but shouldn't we have moved past them by now?

Thank goodness for Jessie Mueller. She's so appealing you're with her from the first scene. Even when you can't quite make out the lyrics, her emotional intensity and vulnerability make you feel the intent of the song anyway. You buy her as a waitress. You understand a little better perhaps how someone can be smart and capable and yet trapped in an abusive relationship without blaming them or considering them weak or at fault. You believe her as a real person even when *Waitress* settles for a magical ending that's far less enjoyable than the one Jenna could have and should have earned on her own.

## **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* \*\*\*

*Hughie* \*\*

*Pericles* (w Christian Camargo) \* 1/2

*Straight* \*\* 1/2

*Eclipsed* \*\*\*

*Red Speedo* \*\*\*

*The Royale* \*\* 1/2

*Boy* \*\*\*\*

*The Robber Bridegroom* \*\*\*

*Hold On To Me, Darling* \*\*\*

*Blackbird* \*\* 1/2

*Disaster!* \*

*The Effect* \*\* 1/2

*Dry Powder* \*\* 1/2

*Head Of Passes* \*\* 1/2

*Broadway By The Year: The 1950s* \*\*\* 1/2

*The Crucible* (w Ben Wishaw) \*\*\*

*Bright Star* \*\*

*She Loves Me* (w Laura Benanti) \*\*\*

*Antlia Pneumatica* \*\* 1/2

*RSC at BAM: Richard II* (w David Tennant) \*\* 1/2

*RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II* (w Antony Sher) \*\*\*

*RSC at BAM Henry V* (w Alex Hassell) \*\* 1/2

*Nathan The Wise* \*\* 1/2

*The Father* \*\*

*American Psycho* \*\*

*Waitress* \*\* 1/2

*Fully Committed* \*\* 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. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.*