

# Theater: Radio City Springs New Tradition; The Elisabeth Moss Chronicles

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**NEW YORK SPRING SPECTACULAR** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**THE HEIDI CHRONICLES** \* out of \*\*\*\*

**THE TALLEST TREE IN THE FOREST** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

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**RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL**

Radio City Music Hall's New York Spring Spectacular has one goal and one goal alone: to create a new tradition in the spring to match their unparalleled success with the Christmas Spectacular. You'll get lots of Rockettes and lots of NYC vignettes, less Santa and a whole lot more Easter Bunny. After a dramatic last minute cancellation in 2014 and an entirely revamped creative team, they have finally presented this long-gestating project...and they've succeeded in spades. This will pack 'em in for years to come.

It's a spectacle of a very particular sort and -- especially if you bring along a kid -- it pretty much gets the job done, as hokey as it is. I did bring a kid and she had a blast ("I've never seen ceilings so tall!" she exclaimed after entering the lobby of Radio City for the very first time.) As we walked out at the end, she was gobsmacked to hear they do another, different show in the fall. "Really?" she said, wide-eyed. We'll be coming back, apparently.

It's a simple story, just like whatever plot they use each year to hang the various set pieces on the Christmas Spectacular. This time, it's about a billionaire (Tony winner Laura Benanti) who wants to fire the lovable old coot named Bernie (Lenny Wolpe) who does her NYC tours and replace him with a virtual Bernie! Virtual Bernies rarely ask for overtime, of course. Meanwhile, an angel named Jack (Derek Hough of Dancing With The Stars) wants to earn his wings. His task? Convince billionaire Jenny to take Bernie's tour, discover the magic of the real New York and real people and save Bernie's job. If you're wondering what happens...well, actually, no one wonders what happens in a show like this.

The show starts with an orchestra popping up and diving right into the classic "Rhapsody In Blue;" subtlety is not on tap here. Before you know it, we've got our set-up, some high kicking from the Rockettes, a Taylor Swift song and we're off to the races. The show swings through landmarks like the Metropolitan Museum Of Art, the New York Public Library, a fashion show, every sports arena you can think of, the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building and more, all delivered with a dusting of magic thanks to the angel Jack and about a gazillion taped celebrity cameos.

It's neatly done with a high-powered creative team including Mia Michaels of my preferred dance show So You Think You Can Dance doing the opener, Diane Paulus & Randy Weiner working as a creative team of overseers, a mild book by Joshua Harmon of the wildly acclaimed play Bad Jews, original songs by Gary Barlow & Eliot Kennedy and all of it helmed by choreographer and director Warren Carlyle. What's remarkable is that despite all these disparate talents and what must have been heavy corporate oversight on a hugely important financial gamble, the show actually has a pulse and a little personality. A few laughs, lots of virtual highlights of

the city, a moment of adult romance for the folks and then it's over.

While they have a similar spirit, the difference between this and the Christmas Spectacular are many. One, that show is essentially an old fashioned revue; all the modern add-ons in recent years like 3-D and video feel like awkward fits meant to keep the show "current." In contrast, the Spring Spectacular has been conceived from the start with all sorts of multi-media elements and they work together naturally and effectively. Two, it's called the Christmas Spectacular so despite a generally secular air, the finale does bring out the Living Nativity and suddenly you get a quick blast of "Jesus is born!" This is not the Easter Spectacular, so while the Easter Bunny pops in and out, there's absolutely no Easter message at the end. Yes, the story revolves around God (voiced by Whoopi Goldberg) giving an angel a task, but Easter it ain't. Finally, this show has stars.

It must have been a much-debated idea to bring in a Tony-winning talent like Laura Benanti and give her top billing. Believe me, whatever they're paying her, it's not enough. The script is a smidge better than average but Benanti elevates the material tremendously. She strikes just the right note: wryly self-aware, but never undercutting the essential sincerity of the story. She makes bad jokes sort of work and makes the few good jokes funnier. She sings beautifully. She even manages to make the "surprise" of dancing with the Rockettes towards the end seem like it's actually happening for the first time. They should beg her to come back next year. Derek Hough is an amiable presence as well, dancing nicely of course and handling his modest dramatic demands capably. He's no singer but gets by easily enough, though I think he has one too many solos for a guy who is essentially a hooper. Their presence pays off and is crucial to turning what could be an anonymous revue into something not bad.

While there's a nominal storyline, the Spring Spectacular is really a string of set pieces, just like the fall edition. Many work, but some don't.

**The Rockettes** -- Golden. To my limited experience, they are used a lot more here than in the Christmas Spectacular and effectively so. The lone exception, oddly, is the big finale, a long, drawn-out and poorly choreographed affair that is underwhelming. Until Benanti comes out and they do those kicks, it's surprisingly dull and should be reworked significantly for next season.

**3-D and those glowing wristbands** -- Kids actually hate 3-D; just look at the dramatically falling numbers for 3-D movie attendance. (Studios make more and more of them and people go to them a lot less, primarily because kids hate the glasses.) Luckily, it's a brief segment but since 3-D is not what a stage show is all about, this is one multi-media element that is worth dropping. No one would miss it. At least it's brief. On the other hand, I thought the wristbands they handed out that glowed and changed colors whenever "magic" happened were a lot of bother for nothing. Yet the audience seemed to be continually amused by them. Still, surely they can do something more with them other than one brief, raise-your-hand segment.

**Movie clips** -- A compilation of movie clips celebrating New York City was a savvy breather, proving entertaining and giving the stage a chance to reset for a new number. Hey, Radio City has a history of exhibiting movies so it makes sense. But The Godfather? Really?

**Met Museum** -- The first stop on the tour set the tone. After a few mild jokes you realize a slightly more sophisticated air would prevail rather than just dancing elves (or in this case, bunnies).

**Tina Fey and Amy Poehler** -- They voiced the lions in front of the Public Library. It's a good example of the show's use of sophisticated technology in service of a simple effect -- talking with the lions. The show is filled with celebrity cameos, most of them harmless but some of them effective, like this. Their jokes were pretty good and it revealed that this Spring Spectacular would focus heavily on using the entire space of Radio City Music Hall. At times, the roof was illuminated to look like the ceiling in Grand Central Station, the walls featured pictures of immigrants who came to America, t-shirts were shot out of cannons into the crowd, ushers tossed around free boxes of popcorn and in this segment the two lions quizzed audience members (including one

effective plant) on New York trivia. The sense of a big party, that the show was spilling out into the audience was a smart move.

**Don't buy your umbrellas on the street** -- A solid "Singin' In The Rain" segment featured Derek Hough. In the performance I saw, he was suddenly saddled with an umbrella that fell apart. Hough handled the snafu like a pro but it's a good lesson for tourists: don't buy umbrellas on the street; they last about five minutes. This was the peak chance for Jared Grimes to shine (he plays Benanti's numbers guy) and he tapped well. Maybe I'm too sensitive -- it does mimic the film, after all -- but I'd tweak their interactions with the cop.

**The romance** -- One didn't really expect a moving storyline from this, so it's hardly a disappointment. But the entire purpose of the tour we're taking is to have the Laura Benanti character open up to the fun of a real tour guide and the pleasures of New York City, while falling in love with the angel Jack. Instead, time and again, something magical takes place involving Jack or the grandkids of Bernie the tour guide while Benanti and her right hand man Grimes would be off to the side, oblivious while chatting on their cell phones. Huh? It's a missed opportunity not to see her won over as each stop reveals something more magical than the one before. The sense of her opening up is utterly lost simply from the staging. She should be a part of the fun right away, first reluctantly and then more and more willingly.

**The original songs** -- Forgettable. They should lean even more on instantly recognizable classics and current tunes like Taylor Swift's "Welcome To New York," not originals. Since she's practically a cheerleader, the Swift tune works particularly well here as backdrop for the Rockettes.

**More dogs!** -- It's astonishing how thrilled audiences are to see live dogs on stage in a theatrical setting. Any show -- play, drama, musical, "happening" -- if you bring on a dog, audiences will melt. This show has an almost constant parade of doggies, putting the corgis in The Audience to shame.

**The sports cavalcade** -- One section has Bernie the tour guide trying to accomplish a feat of sportsmanship like scoring a goal in hockey or hitting a home run. Unlike say the museum section, which went to just the Met, here they decide to go to every single sporting event in the city, complete with a banal celebrity cameo. It's like a parent who tries to overstuff your trip by going to seventeen stops in a day when five stops enjoyed at leisure would be far more memorable. This is a dutiful "checking off" segment and it falls flat. Choose one sporting venue -- Yankee Stadium of course -- and make it fun. Sure, they wanted to give sports fans (ie. little boys, or so they imagine) their due. But it's a real bore. Yet it's not as bad as....

**The fashion show** -- This is the show's number one clunker, an almost absurdly dull and out of place attempt to give fashion a moment to shine. We see faux fashion shows complete with models and photographers while videos of top fashion designers like Isaac Mizrahi describe what inspires them. They let the educational aspect of the show overwhelm them here. If they must, they can keep the futuristic fashion display complete with Rockettes in LED costumes. But they must drop the rest of the segment as a very bad idea, very poorly done. Because this is so female-oriented, they follow this with the laborious sports segment I mentioned above. (It's not exactly a thrill to see video of a sports star chanting "Go Bernie!") This back-to-back misfire is by far the show's weakest area. It's also easily fixed; shorten or remove both immediately. Take the kids on a bathroom break right here.

All in all, despite some dull passages, it was a trim and mildly amusing event. Not theater as such, but a decent spectacle. Mind you, there's an hilarious disconnect between a show extolling the virtues of a live tour guide and seeing the sights of New York...all while giving you a virtual tour of New York. But pointing that out seems pointless in this silly context.

Benanti bears pointing out, though. She's worth her weight in gold and you should knock off half a star or more when imagining the show without her. Hough was also good, though here's one more tweak for them: under no circumstance should he be taking the final bow. It makes no sense in terms of star power in New York City and

hey, their characters just fell in love! It seems awfully ungallant. She should go last or at most they should bow together. But the show itself can take a bow or at least heave a sigh of relief. After a very stormy process, they've got themselves a crowd-pleasing hit.

## **THE HEIDI CHRONICLES** \* out of \*\*\*\* **MUSIC BOX THEATRE**

Oh dear. I was warily looking forward to seeing this revival of The Heidi Chronicles, though I feared the beloved Wendy Wasserstein's Pulitzer Prize-winning play had been wildly overpraised in 1988 and would not date well. To be fair, this is a weak production. But I doubt even an ideal one would do more than bring back misty memories of when a female playwright seemed bold just for being present and commanding attention. Luckily, we have a lot more substantial female playwrights around, thanks in part to Wasserstein (though not nearly enough). So we can treat this simply as a play and not the pathbreaker it was.

The story depicts the chronicles of Heidi (Elisabeth Moss), though when a secondary character makes that reference it seems odd and out of place. She's far from the most storied member of her circle and often seems like a bystander in life, at least as seen here. Nonetheless, we meet the esteemed art historian Heidi Holland giving a lecture on important but overlooked female painters throughout history in 1989.

Then we flash back to Heidi meeting the two major men in her life: best pal and future out gay man Peter Patrone (Bryce Pinkham, very appealing) and brash, masculine, confident and smart Scoop Rosenbaum (a fine Jason Biggs). Scoop is untrustworthy in love and Heidi proves the touchstone of his life as Scoop marries and cheats and makes loads of money. What might his life had been if he'd proven worthy of her? She would have married him, Scoop declares. Yes, but I wouldn't have stayed married to you, Heidi replies in one of the better retorts in this retort-heavy affair.

We dance through decades, charting the progress of women and gays, successful careers, the launch of Scoop's magazine for Baby Boomers, a pal's TV producing career, the spectre of AIDS and so on. It's a quick, superficial trip so you better not blink.

This production has many faults such as an ugly set design that combines sort-of period furniture with slapped-on visuals from each era, as well as atrocious costumes that look like the sort of thing you'd don for a very broad SNL sketch. Indeed, the entire evening feels like a series of strung-together SNL sketches, from the feminist consciousness raising segment to a local TV segment where the otherwise thoughtful Peter is suddenly cutting off Heidi in mid-sentence to score his moment in the sun. (We expect that from Scoop, not Peter.) And again Heidi remains passive, though when she later describes not scoring better on this eight minute segment on a local TV show as one of the major regrets in her life, I can only hope she's joking.

But the major flaw is the play itself, which begins superficially and gets worse. Take Heidi's friendship with Peter. He is the best and most enduring relationship she has. And yet, they barely seem on the periphery of each other's lives. We see them meeting, we see him coming out, we see them re-connecting, we see them at weddings and so on. But they always seem to be catching up. Towards the end, Heidi hasn't been able to reach him for a while and interrupts Peter to say she's taken a teaching job far away and leaving the city, a massive change in her life that Peter knows nothing about even though they live in the same city. He breaks down because it's the late 1980s and friends are the only family a gay man has. Why is he sad and angry? Because all his friends are dying; all he does is go to funeral after funeral and memorial service after memorial service. Doesn't she understand?

But what the hell? This is news to her? Isn't she attending at least some of these funerals? Her best friend is gay, works in medicine, indeed shields HIV positive children from bigots, he's losing friends and lovers left and right and Heidi has to be told what's going on? That would make sense if they hadn't spoken in years. But as far as I can tell, they're best friends. Worse, Heidi then apparently backs out of a commitment to teach, even though

she was literally leaving for her new job that very day. Really? An academic simply backing out at the last minute, leaving the institution high and dry. Surely it would have been a six month or one year commitment to start and she could have promised to return right away. But her career is so meaningless, a mere backdrop to her (lack of a) personal life, that it barely registers.

Her female friends seem even more distant. The consciousness raising segment doesn't feel like a scene where Heidi makes friends for life. It's just a series of jokes. When Scoop's wife and a friend of Heidi's seem to know each other, I'm confused. How did their paths cross? When all these women seem to know Scoop is cheating yet again, I'm even more confused. They barely seem to know each other; when do they trade gossip?

Heidi's best female friend (or at least longest, since by and large Heidi seems alone) swoops in from LA and pitches Heidi on coming up with ideas for a sitcom set in the art world. Has she met Heidi? Heidi is the least pop savvy, least sitcom-friendly person around. She is (presumably) immersed in the art of past centuries. What could conceivably make Heidi seem like a good idea for a consultant on a sitcom? And are they really friends? They keep saying so but it's hard to believe.

Indeed, the entire show feels disconnected. Moss is a marvelous actor on film. I'm not sure her style will transmit to the stage but she certainly doesn't have her legs yet. Wonderfully subtle and compelling on *Mad Men*, here she seems to have wandered into most scenes and barely draws your eye. Moss and everyone else seem to be speaking in italics, which is my phrase for when scripted dialogue sounds exactly like scripted dialogue. You almost start to look for the cue cards. Pinkham does this from the start and almost to a fault. At first I thought it was an adolescent tick for his character; but he continues throughout the show. And yet his performance is the most effective one here, somehow. Biggs is fine but all the rest feel like stock characters given stock characterizations. I was just thinking how I hate plays and movies that echo a line of dialogue from early in the work to remind us of the connection that these characters have...and then this show does it. Twice. Both men and Heidi recite so much dialogue from the first time they met some 20 years earlier I wondered why they didn't just do a flashback.

Heidi is a very passive character and frankly uninteresting character. The only time she really shows any personality is when she's alone on stage, delivering a speech or lecture. But even here Wasserstein undercuts her heroine. It would be nice to know Heidi is a pro at her career if a bit lost in her private life (a cliché, but still). Instead, even her lectures are undercut by some goofy attempts at humor when surely Heidi should be razor sharp. And her big monologue is a speech about the future of women where she breaks down weeping. That's the peak for our strong, independent female who is forging her own path in life? When Heidi adopts a baby towards the end, it feels like an accessory, no more meaningful a step for her than the acclaimed scholarly work she published feels like a real career peak.

In the final scene, we see Heidi in her new bare-bones loft. It's pure white with only a rocking chair in one corner. (The furniture hasn't arrived yet.) But what's the one item that should be visible? What's the one piece that Heidi would have carefully transported herself and immediately placed prominently on the wall? A piece of art, presumably her favorite piece of art. After all, she's an art historian who has made a career out of championing talented but under-appreciated female artists. Surely she would own one piece of art, at least, or even just a poster! And it would be the first thing she would put up in her new home. Yet the walls are blank, as blank as this symbol of a character who marches through time but rarely seems a part of it.

This is thin stuff un-enlivened by the star power on display. Perhaps a powerhouse actress with stage chops could bring something more to the character of Heidi, make her not seem a bystander in her own play. But that wouldn't change the fact that *The Heidi Chronicles* is a dated time capsule -- one of those time capsules lodged in cornerstones in small towns all over the country. It contains the usual items -- events of the day, "timely" issues, pop songs, hair styles, political and social references and so on. It's not particularly unique or revealing and when you get right down to it, not very interesting.

## THE TALLEST TREE IN THE FOREST \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

### BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC

Actor and activist Paul Robeson is a fascinating, even tragic character. Once the most influential and well known black man in America, he fell under the wheel of the McCarthy Era and died a shadow of his former self in the 1970s. We're still waiting for a great movie or miniseries or stage play that tackles this titanic figure. This one-man show written and performed by Daniel Beaty is a potent reminder of Robeson's remarkable trajectory. But Beaty simply isn't up to the demands of creating multiple characters on stage and delineating them one from the other on a dime. It's cleanly directed by Moisés Kaufman with all the tech elements nicely judged. I'd happily hear Beaty give a lecture on Robeson. Unfortunately, a stage play that feels more like a lecture is not so satisfying.

The Tallest Tree In The Forest begins with Robeson being commanded to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the 1950s. Then it jumps back to his childhood and the tragic loss of his brother out of Robeson's life, his academic achievements and how he almost stumbled into performance. Actually, even here the play drops the ball: Robeson is an excellent student and then out of nowhere we're told he gives concerts to raise money to pay his tuition. Really? When did he discover his voice? How did it flourish? Were these concerts the first time he performed in public beyond say the church choir? The arts would prove his calling but we miss how it all began.

The show moves on, with Robeson becoming a lawyer but quitting out of disgust for the virulent prejudice he faced. He's cast in the London production of Show Boat, becomes a star and yet still finds prejudice wherever he turns. A chance encounter with a coal miners' march lights an activist fire, illuminating here what Beaty failed to do with Robeson's musical passion. Soon he is constantly balancing his performances with calls for social justice. Robeson is treated with honor and respect in the Soviet Union, a country where officially all races are treated equally in its governing document. That sparked a passionate appreciation for communism, one that would ultimately doom our hero in the eyes of the public.

His life is so complex and rich, a show about it can't help but be interesting. Still the play Beaty has written is of the very blunt variety. Robeson's father might walk up and say, "Son, I'm so proud of you. You're the third black man to attend this university." Or Robeson might say to a woman he's just met, "I've heard of you. You're the first black woman to achieve such a high position at this institution...." I'm paraphrasing but you get the idea; information is ladled out in chunks.

Worse, Beaty is not a master of multiple characters. His attempts at a Welsh coal miner and a Jewish dissident are unfortunate in the extreme, but many people come and go via awkward, unconvincing attempts at characterization.

Even Robeson himself has an accent that wanders here and there. Yes, sometimes Robeson is speaking one way in public and another in private, but by and large it's a failing on the actor's part. I was often unsure who was talking; in a one-man show, that's death. Keeping each character specific and clear so we always know who is speaking is essential. Beaty is successful at creating two vivid characters, both women. Robeson's wife Essie was always a distinct person and I knew immediately whenever she was speaking. Similarly, a brief monologue from a professor on why Robeson and indeed anyone who speaks up about class and labor is erased from US history also came alive for me.

Those are the exceptions, unfortunately. Along with the play's didactic nature, it also fails to give Robeson his complicated due. Like many on the left that embraced the Soviet Union, he found it hard if not impossible to accept the brutal reality of that totalitarian state. Fair enough, but here Robeson is almost noble in refusing to listen to the pleas of Jewish friends and denounce their treatment and indeed execution in the USSR. And why? Because he's worried about enabling a third world war and nuclear annihilation. It's a little more complicated

than that in the show, but not much. Robeson led a remarkable life and it's easy to see why Beaty or anyone would burn to tell this story. But doing it well is another matter entirely.

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Da no rating

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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.