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Theater: "Rotten" By Name, Naughty By Nature; Bedlam In Jane Austen's World; A Lion In Winter

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Sometimes you see a show because of the reviews or to discover new talent. Other times, you just want to check up on old friends -- how are they and what are they up to? Live theater is pretty special. Unlike movies and TV and books, when you experience this art you are actually in the room with many of the artists involved. Tom Cruise doesn't actually come into your living room when you pop in a BluRay of *Born On The Fourth Of July*. The only similar experience is getting to hear music performed by an artist in concert and even then there's a huge difference between U2 at an arena show and an intimate Off Broadway setting. So here are some old friends: a hit musical just a few weeks from celebrating its first year on Broadway, the very welcome return of a delightful Jane Austen adaptation by the theater troupe Bedlam and the great actor Len Cariou combining some Shakespearean soliloquies with show tunes.

SOMETHING ROTTEN *** out of ****

SENSE & SENSIBILITY *** 1/2 out of ****

BROADWAY & THE BARD * 1/2 out of ****

SOMETHING ROTTEN *** out of ****

ST. JAMES THEATRE

Last April, I was about to see *Something Rotten* when I ate something rotten. A 24-hour bug or food poisoning or something waylaid me the night of the final post-opening date for critics.

[Those deemed not important enough to see the show before it debuts but lucky enough to get to see it anyway are dubbed "second nighters" instead of "first nighters" and are offered a slot right after a show has

officially opened. Miss a "first night" date and you might be able to squeeze in right after it has been reviewed. Miss "second night" and you're out of luck. There's no twelfth night option. I know; boo-hoo -- I get to see Broadway shows! Just explaining.]

I really did consider going that night despite being woozy because I didn't want to miss it. Worse comes to worse, I thought if I threw up in my seat, I could stand up, loudly proclaim, "That was rotten!" and storm out. Not polite, but surely in keeping with the amusing ad campaign for the show and its saucy nature. The audience might even think it was planned! Then I thought, "maybe not," since merely standing up in my apartment made me unsteady.

So here we are, ten months later and I finally get to see the show. Happily, all the key actors are still with it. Seeing it today, I'm a little astonished that this ode to the theater and musicals and backstage hilarity was trumped by the little musical that could, *Fun Home* for Best Musical. It must have been a close race indeed since this winning throwback to the musical comedies of the Fifties (and not the 1650s, but the 1950s) is a goofy pleasure.

Brian d'Arcy James (who left a delicious but small supporting role in *Hamilton* to star in this) plays Nick, one of the two Bottom brothers, a duo that turns out promising theatrical work but are clearly in the shadow of the rock star-like success of that bastard William Shakespeare. With creditors breathing down his neck, a loving wife who is pregnant (Heidi Blickenstaff), a little brother (John Cariani) who is a HUGE fan of the Bard and falling hard for a Puritan girl, not to mention a patron who demands a new idea but *fast*, well what's a bard (not THE Bard, but a bard) to do?

In desperation, Nick turns to Nostradamus (Brad Oscar). Well, not THE

Nostradamus but "a" Nostradamus and pays him to spy into the future and reveal Shakespeare's biggest hit so it can be ripped off before Shakespeare actually writes it. Not half bad as a seer, Nostradamus predicts the invention of the musical but misconstrues *Hamlet* as *Omelette*. Hilarity ensues as they invent a new art form and Shakespeare infiltrates their troupe. If the Bottoms don't quite come out on top, at least musical comedy is a winner.

One can't help forming an impression of a show even without seeing it. Frankly, my expectations were modest but happily surpassed. The silliness is inspired; the "inside" jokes (as in references to Shakespearean lines and musical theater history) are silly and fun, not annoyingly knowing; and the performances by the leads are first rate. I doubt the songs will have much of a life outside of the show. Still, like *A Gentleman's Guide To Love & Murder*, they work wonderfully well here and are a happy throwback to the days when musicals could be fun.

New arrivals to the cast -- like Edward Hibbert in various turns with his usual flair and André Ward kicking things off in style via "Welcome To The Renaissance" -- fit in smoothly. Delivering in supporting parts since the show opened, Blickenstaff makes the most out of a modest role as Nick's wife and Kate Reinders has fun as the love interest Portia. ("Good name!")

But it's the leads that shine strongest and they don't show any signs of flagging ten months into their run. Oscar is a hoot as the prophesying Nostradamus ("Cats!" he shouts out, confused but certain he has seen the future correctly.) Cariani is all tics and sighs as the nebbishy, insecure Nigel Bottom, yet keeps him endearing. That bastard Shakespeare (embodied with hilarious confidence by Christian Borle) was the only one to win a Tony. Isn't that just like him? It's no wonder, since the show is practically designed to create a killer turn, from Will's adoring entrance to his stream of genuinely amusing asides and egotistical statements. The part is a huge opportunity, but I shudder to think what a lesser actor might reduce it to in terms of the obvious.

It's impossible to underrate James as the anchor of the show, allowing the nuttiness to flow around him the way the leads of many great sitcoms play it straight so those around them can be even funnier. He's desperate, angry and appealing in his envy, like a Salieri who can sing. *Hamilton's* loss was *Something Rotten's* gain. This show was a huge gamble for its producers. It famously had such a great backer's showcase that everyone decided to forego an out of town tryout and just open cold on Broadway. In this day and age, that's a bold move and while it did avoid the *Hamilton* juggernaut of 2016, it didn't pay off in Tonys. Artistically and commercially, however, it proved the smartest thing they

could do, a bet that paid off beautifully. The proof may well be on display at the St. James in February of 2017.

SENSE & SENSIBILITY *** 1/2 out of ****

GYM AT JUDSON

Bedlam is one of the most acclaimed theater troupes in N.Y.C. and rightly so. I was excited when they tackled Jane Austen, for this writer has been the source of numerous great films (from the miniseries *Pride & Prejudice* to *Persuasion* and even *Clueless*). Oddly, however, Austen has rarely been successfully translated to the stage. You can see her work done here and there, but it's almost never appeared on Broadway or in the West End and even less often to critical and commercial acclaim.

Well, you could toss all that aside as ancient history when Bedlam dusted off *Sense and Sensibility* (itself turned into a classic film by Emma Thompson who wrote, starred and had the sense to bring on Ang Lee as director). This riotously funny production flies by -- quite literally, since the entire set seems to be on wheels and moves about with alacrity to bring alive everything from a drawing room to a stately dinner to a horse and carriage ride. Perhaps the key is a woman as interpreter? Thompson did her best work in the screenplay and here Kate Hamill pulls off a triumph with her adaptation. (I actually typed "wit" by accident instead of "with;" that works too.) it should become a staple for theaters around the country.



Bedlam's **SENSE & SENSIBILITY**
Pictured (l to r): Jason O'Connell, Kate Hamill, John Russell
Photo by Ashley Garrett, 2016

Properly so, since this is an adaptation, Hamill's version has its own sensibility. Here the humor is emphasized, but it never tilts the story out of perspective. May I ask you to check out [my original review of the](#)

[show?](#) Most everything applies again for a production I named one of the Best of 2014.

In truth, this time I was mildly less dazzled than upon a first viewing, simply because I'd already seen it and expected dazzle. And I missed tremendously director Eric Tucker's inimitable turn as Mrs. Jennings. (Gabra Zackman has the thankless task of following him in the role.) On the plus side, playwright Hamill has settled into the part of the willful Marianne much more convincingly here than the first time around, so let's call it a wash. Everyone else remains superb or joins the company well, from John Russell as the dashing but disreputable John Willoughby to Jason O'Connell's wonderfully understated Edward Ferrars. I was amused before, but this time O'Connell's doubling as Edward's rambunctious and self-admiring brother had me in stitches.

And a second viewing allowed me to appreciate the subtleness of the direction and staging even more. Tucker and Hamill have done wonders here. The entire set is mobile and the fluid changes from scene to scene are a delight. Even during scenes, it has purpose: when a character at dinner is about to divulge some tidbit of gossip (the coin of the realm in Austen's world), the other characters glide over on their chairs and crowd around like vultures picking over a carcass. Again and again, I was struck by how the movement of the characters and the sets may have been clever and playfully imaginative but always, always was keyed to the tenor of the scene and the emotional undercurrents. If Elinor and Edward feel the world conspiring to keep them apart, you can bet that the scene they're in will end with the furniture and windows and chairs parading between them to embody this. (I still object to the textually faithful but unwise staging of the climax, but it's a small cavil.)

Finally, I am in love with Andrus Nichols, who plays Elinor with such intelligence and presence that it almost erases my memory of Thompson in the part. Somehow, I want her to remain with Bedlam (which she co-founded with Tucker and is the Producing Director of) and continue these intimate productions *and* be on Broadway *and* be in film and TV as her talent deserves. It makes no sense, but love never does.

BROADWAY & THE BARD * 1/2 out of ****

THE LION THEATRE AT THEATRE ROW

Len Cariou is a Broadway legend, forever linked to that seminal original production of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* with Angela Lansbury but with a host of other notable theatrical credits to his name. Since making a splash opposite Lauren Bacall in *Applause*, this Tony winner has toyed with the idea of an evening of Shakespearean soliloquies combined

with Broadway show tunes that either deepen the message of the piece at hand or offer a riposte.

Now, finally, here it is, with the 76 year old actor -- currently starring as the patriarch on the hit CBS show *Blue Bloods* -- holding court in the intimate space of Theatre Row's Lion with Mark Janas on piano.



(Photo by Carol Rosegg, 2016)

One might have structured this evening in a number of ways, though obviously John Gielgud already used "Ages Of Man." You might have told the story of Cariou's career through the progression of pieces. You might have offered insight into his acting. You might have just let Cariou loose on his favorite stories. Unfortunately, only a little of each of these approaches is present and none of it provides the structure and forward movement the show desperately needs. We're left adrift, with one piece randomly following the next and no sense of it leading anywhere in particular.

Those looking for insight into the Bard by Cariou come away empty. Those hoping to sense the breadth of his impressive career will be bereft. Those waiting for juicy stories will wait. (Tackling *Lear* was life-changing for him, says Cariou, who builds up this semi-anecdote by saying he was chomping at the bit to play *Macbeth*, only to have the play changed at the very last minute. It changed his life, he says, but how I haven't a clue.)

We're left with speeches and songs. Cariou can happily do justice to many of the speeches. But out of context and with no over-arching structure to contain them, their random nature often denudes them of their power. He does a quietly menacing turn as Iago from *Othello* and a solid funeral speech by Marc Antony, But too often even here Cariou

comes roaring into *Henry V* or some such part and we're barely caught up before the piece is over.

The songs themselves are impeccable of course, but after the mildly amusing contrast of *Henry V's* rousing "once more" with the title tune from *Applause*," they feel pretty random. And Cariou's voice is a shadow of its former self. Great singers can find a sweet spot later in life; they may have lost range but gained such insight into the lyrics that rewards can be found. I fear Cariou's voice has passed even that stage; recitation of the lyrics a la Mabel Mercer might have been wiser. Also, he seemed lost in the lyrics a few times and dried up completely during "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" at the finale.

Luckily, Cariou was surrounded by an audience happy to be sharing a space with a talent they'd been seeing and appreciating for decades. For a few moments, one could see the shape of the show he had in mind. When Cariou transitioned from an absolutely lovely and convincing "Ages Of Man" from *As You Like It* into "September Song" (a tune that can readily accommodate itself to a faded voice with poignant effectiveness) time indeed stopped and Broadway and the Bard and Cariou became one.

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 *** 1/2

Broadway & The Bard * 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.

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CONVERSATIONS