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Michael Giltz
Freelance writer and raconteur

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ANYTHING GOES ** 1/2 out of ****
STEPHEN SONDHEIM THEATRE

It's hard to go wrong with a sturdy musical theater vessel like the Cole Porter classic *Anything Goes*. But the Roundabout comes close with the mildly pleasant revival currently on Broadway, an indifferent affair saved almost entirely by those buoyant songs. Undemanding subscribers certainly won't feel cheated but this is not a show anyone involved was driven to mount.

The story is as fluffy as they come. Reno Sweeney (Tony winner Sutton Foster) is a good-time gal and nightclub singer who has fallen hard for her pal Billy Crocker

(Colin Donnell). He's a young eager beaver on Wall Street who has half the women in New York ready to invest in his portfolio. But Billy has unexpectedly fallen in love with the beautiful, out-of-his-league debutante Hope Harcourt (*Grease* reality show winner Laura Osnes). She of course loves him back but must marry the drippy but harmless Lord Evelyn Oakleigh (the very good Adam Godley) so that mother (Jessica Walter) can stay ensconced in wealth. Meanwhile, Public Enemy No. 13 or so Moonface Martin (Tony winner Joel Grey) is evading the police and they all end up on a luxury liner headed to London during which madcap hilarity ensues.

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It's all a very thin excuse for a string of great numbers like "I Get A Kick Out Of You," "You're The Top," "Easy To Love," "Friendship," "It's De-Lovely," "All Through the Night" and the two show-stoppers "Blow, Gabriel, Blow" and of course "Anything Goes." So you've got your usual luxury liner set with stairs on both sides and three levels for the hoofers, some silly romance that's sure to come out alright and a passel of great tunes. What could go wrong? Plenty, actually,

Foster glides through the role of Reno with the charm and talent we expect. But Reno is a role you steamroll your way through and that never happens here. One problem is she's paired with partners that force Foster to dial it down. Donnell is a handsome fella -- it's easy to see him making New York swoon -- but he's never more than amiable and certainly doesn't wow with his vocals. In London, the charismatic John Barrowman literally stole the show from Reno and made you think this musical was really about Billy; no such luck here. Osnes is even more anonymous as the ingenue (admittedly not a role that offers much of an opportunity beyond looking pretty and "All Through The Night"). Jessica Stone is quite amusing as Erma, but her big chance to shine -- "Buddie, Beware" -- also falls flat. Andrew Cao (so good in the delightful musical *Frog Prince*) is wasted in a minor role but has so much charisma you can easily imagine him as an ideal Billy.

Even pros like Grey, Walter (currently doing Emmy-worthy work in *Archer*, the best sitcom on TV) and John McMartin (as Eli Whitney) can't do more than get by. They're all let down by unimaginative sets, costumes, direction and choreography. The set by Derek McLane is functional and little more, especially falling short in the nightclub scene. The costumes by Martin Pakledinaz are also just good enough...and also not sexy or flashy enough for that same scene featuring "Blow, Gabriel, Blow." The solid lighting by Peter Kaczorowski is a saving grace on the tech side.

Time and again the usually dependable director/choreographer Kathleen Marshall (who most recently thrilled with her revival of *The Pajama Game*) doesn't deliver. When Reno sings "I Get A Kick Out Of You," Billy basically just sits there. When Grey delivers his inspirational comic moment "Be Like The Blue Bird," all she can think to do with the prison set and Billy is to plunge it into darkness and again have him sit there. "Blow, Gabriel, Blow" and the finale look more like traffic jams at times as she moves the large cast around the stage. Erma is a go-getter who chases every sailor in sight and has them dancing to her tune -- so why is she handed around like a parcel during her one chance to shine on "Buddie?"

One could go on but it's more about missed opportunities than a disastrous night out. The gawky Godley is amusing as the silly Brit, a happy reminder of why this show gets revived every few years. And when Foster gets a chance to dance and sing her heart out on "Anything Goes" and the finale, you can't help but smile. Cole Porter is the tops, after all.

THE DIVINE SISTER *** 1/2 out of ****
SOHO PLAYHOUSE

I just got a chance to catch the latest Charles Busch comedy *The Divine Sister* at the Soho Playhouse before it closes at the end of the month. Everyone told me it's his best in years and they're right. The story is the usual foolishness -- a Catholic school is about to go bankrupt and Mother Superior must convince the wealthy, widowed, fervently atheistic Jewess down the road to pony up the funds. Plus



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there's a suspicious new German nun who seems to be embroiled in a plot twist from *The Da Vinci Code* and a nun-in-training who hears voices and can heal the wounded.

The trick is that this 90 minute comedy is tightly plotted and delivered with verve by a cast that straddles that delicious line between out of control lunacy and a genuine affection for their nutty characters. Alison Fraser is hilarious as the German nun and Busch stalwart Jennifer Van Dyck is just splendid as the Jewish widow Mrs. Levinson. She nails the very specific but over-the-top style that somehow makes this work. Carl Andress directs with cool efficiency and keeps everyone on the same page (not an easy task in a show that tempts one to chew the scenery). At the center of it all of course is Busch, who wrote this witty work and performs it with relish and a subtlety that's rarely appreciated. He's inspired so many imitators who have delivered so many similar but markedly inferior works that you can forget how good it can be. Rush to see *The Divine Sisters* before it closes and you'll know: this is how it's done.

THE 2010-2011 THEATER SEASON (ratings on a four star system)

Angels in America revival at Signature *** out of ****

Anything Goes ** 1/2

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The Diary Of A Madman with Geoffrey Rush at BAM ***

The Divine Sister *** 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with tickets to these shows with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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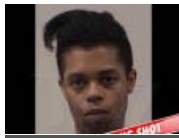


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