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## Theater: Smooth Sailing On "Pacific Overtures;" Starry, Cloudy "Bandstand"

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PACIFIC OVERTURES \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

BANDSTAND \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

PACIFIC OVERTURES \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

You have to pity other composers. *Pacific Overtures* is clearly one of Stephen Sondheim's flawed but fascinating, difficult to mount, less than perfect musicals — to string together just a few descriptions that have clung to it like barnacles over the years. And yet it's filled with numbers that would be peak material for anyone else, including Sondheim's personal favorite "Someone In A Tree" and the offhand beauty of "Poems," not to mention the wittiness of "Please Hello" and the act two gem "A Bowler Hat," which neatly embodies the themes of the show in one brilliant (brush) stroke.

That rundown doesn't even include the haunting "Pretty Lady," a song I first heard out of context (and thus shorn of its potential menace) on a solo album by Mandy Patinkin. I've only seen the show once before, a lumbering 2004 production by Roundabout that was a sluggish cruise liner overburdened with passengers. It underlined all the show's problems and didn't make me eager to see it again.

Yet here we are in 2017, with the Classic Stage Company's artistic director John Doyle delivering what seems the ideal setting for this shimmering work of intelligence and contemplation. *Pacific Overtures* has always seemed more of an essay than a musical, thoughtful and probing rather than emotionally engaging. Doyle turns that flaw into a virtue by cutting three numbers (including the Act One finale!) and presenting it as ceremony. That ceremony may be a funeral (albeit a funeral for a "pure," isolated Japan the show is well aware never really existed) but when the music is by Sondheim a funeral can be a lovely thing indeed.

The audience enters CSC and as so often happens in this intimate space with its inherent limitations, CSC brings out the best in the technical team. Doyle designed it and his work, along with costumer Ann Hould-

Ward and the lighting of Jane Cox is elegant in its simplicity. The audience is seated along two long walls with an elevated walkway running between us from one side of the room to another. It ends in front of a space reserved for a marvelous nine piece orchestra. The narrow stage is all white and curves up towards the ceiling — like rice paper — with calligraphy appearing towards the top. Actors enter from one end, step up onto the platform and the ritual begins. With minimal props and the practiced air of repeating actions that have been performed many times before, we are shorn of any expectation for heavy plotting and dramatic action. This is more tableaux than theater and it suits well the intent and achievement of what Sondheim created.



PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS COPYRIGHT 2017

Kelvin Moon Loh, Austin Ku, George Takei, Marc Oka and Thom Sesma in CSC's  
"Pacific Overtures"

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Jonathan Tunick has again delivered the orchestrations for this show. I haven't compared it to his earlier work on this musical, but I assume that the smaller pool of musicians has encouraged Tunick to combinations of instruments that beautifully emphasize the Eastern style Sondheim drew upon. Quite simply, it sounds gorgeous and — since we are not hearing a Western scale or traditional Broadway orchestrations that might build to the climax and release we are trained to expect — our minds reset. We observe and consider instead.

The story is a depressing if inevitable one. Japan lives in blessed isolation, a world described in a voice-over by our gently authoritative narrator George Takei. The first number begins and with "The Advantages of Floating In The Middle Of The Sea," the tone is set for the rest of the night. A small, nimble cast enacts the story of Japan being encroached upon by the West with the arrival of American warships. Confident in their

superiority, the top officials of Japan deputize a minor nobody named Kayama (an excellent Stephen Eng) to shoo the barbarians away. On the off chance this fails, of course, Kayama will be the one to suffer.

But the Americans will not be shooed. Kayama cleverly draws upon the modest knowledge of a sailor (Orville Mendoza) to devise a plan to placate the foreigners, please the shogun (not to mention the Emperor) and hopefully save his own life. It works, for a time.

Then the Americans return and demand a little more and then a little more, always casually displaying the cannons and other advanced weapons of war that the Japanese would be hopeless against. Soon the representatives of other foreign powers appear and demand their own access to Japan. In the boisterous “Please Hello,” England, Russia, France and others are all very polite as they take and take and take. Japan will never be the same again.

To be sure, comedy and drama are present, including the delightful multiple perspectives of a major ceremony presented in “Someone In A Tree,” the death of Kayama’s wife and that sailor joining with rebels who decide Japan has shamed itself by kowtowing to the West. Nonetheless, every element of this *Pacific Overtures* allows us to savor the individual moments without demanding or needing more than it is ready to offer.

Act One was always a bit of a beast compared to Act Two. Cutting three numbers from the first act (including the American Admiral Perry’s big number) and letting the show flow in stately style from start to finish is revelatory, allowing the musical’s real balance to emerge and the focus to remain on the Japanese point of view.

The ensemble is certainly up to the task, singing and performing beautifully from Eng down to the handsome Karl Josef Co in various small roles. Doyle’s hand is especially sure in guiding the mostly reactive performances of Takei and Megan Masako Haley. She sings sweetly in “There Is No Other Way” but spends most of the show onstage merely observing the action. Both she and Takei embody a reserve, a way of being in the moment and yet remaining outside it that allows us to do the same. They are an audience that knows how the story ends but are still learning what it all means.

Is the original *Pacific Overtures* flawed? To be sure. Has Doyle fixed it? Only by embracing those very flaws and recognizing them as essential to the show’s nature. The Japanese tradition of kintsugi involves the repairing of a broken piece of pottery. It doesn’t attempt to hide the cracks but instead highlights them by using gold or silver or platinum powder in the lacquer. Kintsugi suggests flaws shouldn’t be hidden but celebrated as part of a piece’s proud history. A cracked bowl becomes a thing of beauty precisely because of the flaws and the way someone has lovingly restored it.

Doyle has done the same with *Pacific Overtures*. You think the show is too static, too intellectual, too unconventional? Perhaps you’re right, he says. And Doyle holds those cracks up to the light, he lovingly traces those very flaws, he observes them from every angle and he allows us to see for the first time how beautiful they are.

BANDSTAND \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\* (but \*\*\* if it's your first time)

BERNARD B. JACOBS THEATRE

I was lucky enough to see *Bandstand* at the Papermill Playhouse in October of 2015. (I'd never miss an original production at Papermill, which has launched *Newsies* and the audience favorite *A Bronx Tale* in recent years.) I've been rooting for it ever since. It's an original musical, it boasts two very appealing leads in Laura Osnes and Corey Cott and it delivers an old fashioned story set right after WW II in which some scrappy artists struggle to hit the big time of big band music. But it's also modern enough to layer in an awareness of GIs struggling with the memories of war (PTSD) and an America that wants to clap them on the back and move on.

The creative team has put a lot of hard work into this musical and it shows. They've streamlined the story, adding in nifty fixes here and there, set up the Act One crisis more clearly and generally tightened its ambitions every step of the way. Unfortunately, they couldn't break with the show's big final number and denouement or shake a certain seen-it-before nature endemic to the familiar material. It didn't quite work in 2015 and it doesn't quite work now. But it's a promising first effort and I dearly hope the creative team of Richard Oberacker and Rob Taylor can bounce back and dive right into another show. Like the veterans in their musical, they shouldn't let the lack of blockbuster success their first time out keep them down.

Our story centers on a talented pianist named Donny Novitski (Cott, digging into the role with leading man relish). He's home from the war but the war has come along for the ride. (In one of the show's best ideas, Donny and other vets are literally dragged down by the staggering, zombie-like presence of their fallen buddies who at several key moments are seen literally clinging to their friends as they go about their lives, or rather, try to.) Like so many vets, Donny is at a loss. Years have passed and his hot shot status in the local music scene of Cleveland has cooled off. Other, younger guys have taken his place; everyone is glad to see Donny home safe and sound, but a job? Maybe he could work a bar mitzvah or two? As if that isn't hard enough, Donny is haunted by the death of his best friend in battle (Donny blames himself). He promised to check up on the guy's widow but is too haunted by guilt to do so — she's sure to ask how it happened and that's the last thing Donny wants to talk about.

Salvation — or at least a great distraction — arrives in a national contest on the radio. Every state will hold a contest with local bands writing their own tribute to the troops. The winners come to New York City, play for a nationwide audience and the best one of all gets to perform in a movie. Donny hits on a sure fire hook: he's going to recruit other veterans so their song honoring the troops will have the added kick of being performed by guys who actually served. (Take that, Sinatra!) It's a clever if cynical idea and high on the excitement of making it happen, Donny finally pays a visit to the widow. Turns out she's gorgeous and can sing (hello, Laura Osnes) and before you know it his crackerjack band has a girl singer, a really good song ("Love Will Come And Find Me Again") and my god they just might pull it off! Too bad now Donny has the guilt of his friend's death compounded by the fact that now he's drawn to the friend's widow to boot!

Check out my original review for a complete rundown of the show. The entire main cast is the same (except for Alex Bender stepping in as Nick). Despite many admirable changes by Oberacker (who did the score) and Taylor (who collaborated with Oberacker on the songs and the book), my general observations remain the same. Among the many improvements, they dumped Donny's parents and in general director and choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler has worked with his team to create an even better sense of propulsive forward motion.

I think some tweaks were added to emphasize echoes of war in the lighting of Jeff Croiter (which pops like anti-aircraft batteries once or twice) and the first act in particular *moves*. The sense of songs weaving in and out of the plot is stronger than before. The scenic design by David Korins employs a modest stage towards the back of the set for the many band scenes. It works fine but I still have the sense that the choreography feels a little constrained by it — much of the action seems to occur towards the lip of the stage, with dancer after dancer sliding in from each side as if there was only a tight landing strip on which they could perform. As for the overall scenic design, New York City still doesn't dazzle the way it should after Cleveland.

Kudos especially to the sound design of Nevin Steinberg, which has a very daunting task. Notably by using hot mikes or a different audio mix at key moments (or both), Steinberg manages to turn up the heat on the vocals during live performances in the show, allowing the audience to feel the energy of the band kicking into action and wowing a crowd. (A slightly different, more natural audio mix is used when the leads are singing in "real" life as opposed to in performance as a band.)

Beth Leavel is a tonic as the mother of Osnes's Julia, but her big number in the second act — "Everything

Happens” — is fussily and overly arranged, barely allowing a chance for the song to breathe or Leavel to put her formidable stamp on it. The rest of the supporting cast is very good as well, especially Geoff Packard as an OCD-ish vet who drives his wife and family away. All the men in the band have tics and PTSD to one degree or another; in general, their problems are acknowledged without being hammered on too incessantly.

It works quite well up to the end of Act One. That’s when the band competes and wins the Ohio contest by performing a very good song called “Love Will Come And Find Me Again.” We know it’s about the confused feelings of Julia, a war widow who doesn’t want to spend the rest of her life in mourning but of course still misses her husband. Like a good standard, that specific situation is transformed into a more general yearning for happiness that anyone can identify with. This isn’t the era of Bob Dylan and they’ve delivered a song that arises out of war but transcends it without forgetting the pain that the tune sprang from.

This is precisely what they fail to do at the finale. The show climaxes with the band choosing to do a different, brutally honest song live on the radio for various noble reasons, even though they know it means they won’t win the contest. The problem however is that this song isn’t very good. “Welcome Home” sounds like a discordant breakdown and its lyrics are far too banally specific when detailing the struggles that the band members have been fighting since returning from war. It’s as well intentioned as they come and probably the song the creatives felt the entire show was building to, but it’s just not successful. The denouement is handled a little more gracefully here, but it still seems superfluous to me.

But what a lot they tackled and accomplished. Among its many other accomplishments, *Bandstand* uses actors that play their own instruments to great effect. They also boldly allow certain songs to be performed in an okay fashion, only to be delivered in later, better form when the lyrics are tweaked or the band works out a better arrangement. It’s no small feat to believe these folks are indeed a working band that might just wow ‘em in Cleveland (“I Got A Theory”) and deserve to dream of hitting the big time.

I feel the same about Oberacker and Taylor, who hit the big time their first time together by getting a new musical mounted on Broadway. Sure, they would have preferred a lot more Tony nominations (the show snagged two, including one for Blankenbuehler’s choreography and another for the excellent orchestrations of Bill Elliott and Greg Anthony Rassen). I’m sure the birth of Cott’s first child the day before the nominations were announced put such things into welcome perspective. And so undoubtedly does the sight of some aged veterans I saw the day I attended, standing up at the end of key numbers and the first to rise at the curtain call. It’s a tribute to Oberacker and Taylor that they attracted such talent to their show the first time out. Now they need to learn from this and go out and do it again.

## **Theater Of 2017**

The Fever (The Public’s UTR Festival) \*\*

Lula del Ray (The Public’s UTR Festival) \*\*

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) \*\*

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) \*\*

The Present \*\*

The Liar \*\*\* 1/2

Jitney \*\*\* 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) \*\*\* 1/2

Significant Other \* 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth \*\*\*

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) \*\* (third visit, but \*\*\* if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) \*\* 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) \*\*\* 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) \*\*\*\*

The Light Years \* 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) \*\*\* 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips \*\*

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) \*

Come From Away \*

Miss Saigon \*\*

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba \* 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s \*\*

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) \*\*\*

Latin History For Morons \* 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production w Bobby Stegert)

Wakey Wakey \*\*\*

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) \*\*\*

CasablancaBox \*\* 1/2

Amélie \* 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong \*\*

Indecent \*\* 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) \*\*\*

The Antipodes \*\*

Anastasia \*\*

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory \*\*

Oslo \*\*\* 1/2

The Little Foxes \*\*

Groundhog Day \*\* 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O’Hara at Carnegie Hall) \*\* 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra \*\*

A Doll’s House, Part 2 \*\*\* 1/2

Bandstand \*\* 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) \*\*\*

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) \*\*

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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.***