

Theater: Some Disappointments and a Promising Young Composer -- Stephen Sondheim

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LOST LAKE ** out of ****

MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB

GRAND CONCOURSE ** out of ****

PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS

SATURDAY NIGHT *** out of ****

YORK THEATRE COMPANY AT ST. PETER'S

Some people imagine critics relish writing bad reviews. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's a lot more fun writing a rave than a pan. But perhaps even worse than a really bad show is a show that leaves you indifferent. Someone asks what you think... and you shrug. It's a sad situation, since no show is written or staged lightly. It almost always represents at the very least a year (and usually years) of work beginning with the playwright. You struggle to latch onto some praiseworthy element, anything that's worth discussing. But it ain't always easy, no matter how competent the work of all involved.

Such is the case for two new plays. Lost Lake comes from the Pulitzer Prize winner David Auburn, so expectations are naturally high for any new work by him. Grand Concourse is from Heidi Schreck, the Obie-winning talent who also writes for TV's Nurse Jackie. Neither quickens the pulse, though each play is blessed with a fine cast.

First, Lost Lake. I was intrigued to see actor John Hawkes on stage. He's been a favorite since Deadwood (can we give that show another two seasons, please?) and been so successful since it feels like that terrific show is almost an afterthought in his Playbill bio. Happily, Hawkes proves just as compelling on stage, despite seeming to waver a bit on one late monologue. He plays a hapless loser, a guy cut off from his ex-wife and his daughter, barely tolerated by his family while he squats at the family cabin. Hogan (Hawkes) is so desperate for cash he rents out the cabin to a nurse (a nurse practitioner, she corrects him!) named Veronica (the appealing Tracie Thoms) looking to give her kids a week away from New York City. While she's in his home, he sleeps rough in his truck.

In a series of short scenes, these two cross swords, reveal personal traumas and bond in a modest, semi-personal fashion. It all takes place in the cabin he's renting out (behind his family's back). She checks the place out, he comes over to do repairs he promised would be done before they moved in, she sidesteps his requests for the final payment and so on. Truths are revealed, jokes are made, the possibility of romance gently rises only to be just as quickly dismissed and it's over.

Nothing about this modest work is terribly interesting. With Auburn and two fine actors, you might come in with strong expectations. But those are quickly dialed down to Lost Lake proving a minor character study. Not every play needs to be the Great American Play to satisfy and entertain. Sometimes a less lofty goal is in fact exactly what one wants. But soon even this minor goal proves elusive. A child almost drowns, suicide is considered, an explosion of anger frightens and yet most of that happens off stage and isn't very interesting anyway. The

details of these two people's lives prove just a checklist of quirks and information.

Thoms has a great way with a reaction shot, garnering laughs without saying a word. (She would be terrific in the right sitcom.) Hawkes indeed enlivens the admittedly more interesting basket case Hogan. But ultimately, the most memorable moment of the show is a deft method of transitioning from one scene to the next: they devised a very simple but very effective method of showing the cabin sinking into disarray that works with disarming simplicity. It's not just clever; it also somehow encapsulates something inevitable about Hogan's essentially lost nature. But when a minor detail like how they litter the set with detritus to show the passage of time should not be the main image that stays with you from a play.

Similarly, Grand Concourse has some very good actors -- four instead of two. Whereas Lost Lake has almost no plot, Grand Concourse has perhaps too much. A nun struggling with the act of prayer is running a soup kitchen in the city. She uses the timer on a microwave in order to force herself to pray for at least one minute and hopes to work her way up to five. Eventually. Ok, so faith is perhaps not a strong suit for her right now. But in every other respect, the tireless Sister Shelley (Quincy Tyler Bernstine) is a model of charity.

She puts up with and sees the humanity in nutty homeless people like Frog (Lee Wilkof). She works well with the staff like Oscar (Bobby Moreno), keeping them inspired and on point. And she even opens her arms -- in a brisk, business-like fashion -- to the endless parade of volunteers like teenager Emma (Ismenia Mendes), well-intentioned people who usually last about one day if you're lucky.

Emma proves a little different. She feels...needy somehow and that's explained when she blurts out she has leukemia. Oscar has a girlfriend but the offbeat, crazy Emma catches his eye. She plays practical jokes, she tries to start a jobs program and insinuates herself into every aspect of the soup kitchen. But like so many before her, Emma seems to need as much help as the people she claims to be there for.

None of this is terribly interesting, but the strong cast keeps it moving along. Until early on yet another revelation upends our idea of Emma. I immediately lost all interest in the show though of course I hoped it would win me back. No such luck. Plot twist followed onto obvious plot twist -- a homeless man who skips his meds? who would have guessed! -- and the attempt to make it all really about the faith Shelley has been struggling with simply wasn't enough.

Bernstine holds your attention with her odd little throat-clearing and brusque delivery of her lines that captures well so many nuns I've known. She has the show's best monologue, the story of how she had a dream about a boy she had a crush on and how that led her to enter orders. The terrific Moreno -- who has been excellent in everything I've seen him in -- gives low-key charm to Oscar. He has a nice moment of humanity when Emma's actions might have made a lesser person snap. And Wilkof has the show's best lines as the joke-telling Frog, though even he can't bring newness to a tired cliché. Mendes seemed by far the weak link on stage. But to be clear her character was by far the weakest as well, a combustible train wreck of a teen that sounds dramatic but is tiresome and uninteresting to deal with.

Grand Concourse has the exhausting nature of a play that goes on well beyond the point where you've given up, with characters that stubbornly remain "characters" and a play that remains a "play" and never becomes a story you can lose yourself in.

Happily, the York Theatre Company had its regular Musicals In Mufti series on tap. Musicals In Mufti is simply a casual performance of a musical, with actors given one week to bone up on the stories and songs and then perform it on a bare stage, scripts in hand. On tap was Stephen Sondheim's intended first Broadway show, Saturday Night. (It collapsed when the key producer died unexpectedly.)

Saturday Night is exactly the sort of show these presentations are made for. It has some terrific elements, namely a very good score, but lots of problems like a book that is ok in the first act but needs a lot of work in the

second. By a lot of work, I mean being entirely rewritten. Despite the starry talents involved (the book is based on a play by the team behind *Casablanca*) it's virtually never staged. So anyone wanting to see what Sondheim's first show was like is urged to head on over before it closes on November 16. You'll find a large ensemble of young talent delivering the goods.

Four pals are sitting around lamenting their inability to get a date on Saturday night. But their pal Gene isn't wasting time. he's got dreams of class, of moving on up, and he's got the looks and the suit needed to sneak into swellegant parties and affairs. Gene bumps into a similar gate crasher named Helen and of course they fall in love. In a whirlwind plot, Gene and Helen plot a future, he accidentally rents a swank apartment and purposefully sells his brother's car to buy stocks in a "sure thing" that will solve all his problems. Did I mention it takes place in 1929?

Charm is on tap here. The quartet of lovelorn guys is a lot of fun, with Jared Loftin especially droll as the penny-pinching Ray. Ben Fankhauser and Margo Seibert are affable as the lovers, though they become less interesting as the plot muddies whatever sense these two characters had. Lindsay Mendez is a no-nonsense delight as Celeste. And Andrew Keenan-Bolger (Crutchie in *Newsies*) steals the show as the caustic lady's man Bobby. One of the charms of these casual presentations is the little speed bumps that occur and how the actors deal with them. The night I attended, a musical miscue threw off Keenan-Bolger's big number and he charmingly rewound the action and deservedly wound up with the strongest applause of the night.

Time and again, you'd watch them in action and say, "That kid's got talent!" None more so than neophyte composer Stephen Sondheim. This is no promising effort. It's a full-blown score with loads of good songs. Sure, a rhyme or two here or there isn't up to snuff. An ode to Brooklyn is excellent but makes little dramatic sense as practically the 11:00 o'clock number. But it's Sondheim and you know it virtually from the start. The opener "Saturday Night" is terrific and shows his usual flair for melody. Others deftly limn the characters singing. Still others offer charming pastiche of period tunes from the 1920s. And on and on, from "A Moment With You" to "Exhibit A" to "In The Movies" and numerous others. Any show today would kill to have this many good songs. That includes "I Remember That," a song in which a married couple reminisces about their first date -- it's a dead ringer for "I Remember It Well," the charming number from *Lerner & Lowe's Oscar-winning Gigi*. And Sondheim wrote his three years earlier.

This guy had the goods right from the start and it was a pleasure to watch the book and hear the songs in this stripped down casual presentation. It was the 100th *Musicals In Mufti* offering and a more fitting anniversary is hard to imagine. Except [coming up soon is a presentation of My Favorite Year by Ahrens and Flaherty](#) that has a new book and a clutch of new songs making their world premiere. If you can't make it to Saturday Night by Sunday night, make sure you book [My Favorite Year](#).

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