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**Michael Giltz**

Freelance writer

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## Theater: "Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark" -- The Review

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**SPIDERMAN: TURN OFF THE DARK** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**FOXWOODS THEATRE**

Our story so far... Never mind. You know about the budget, the delays, the drama, the rewrites. I didn't see the earlier incarnations of *Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark*, so I came to this show with very modest expectations and must sadly report that they weren't met. If you're an absolute fanatic for Spiderman or have a little kid desperate to see it, the show is painless and has some striking elements in its production design to keep you engaged. That's better than some Broadway musicals but hardly a ringing endorsement.

The central flaw is not the story or the set or the direction (by Julie Taymor with Philip William McKinley listed as "creative consultant" and Taymor as providing "original direction"). The central flaw is the score and songs by Bono and The Edge. The best number in the show is "Vertigo," the hit U2 song that's heard briefly in a nightclub sequence. Otherwise, vaguely anthemic numbers like "Rise Above" and "Boy Falls From The Sky" strive for importance but deliver neither the melodic hooks of U2 nor the character-driven emotion of the best Broadway songs.

Two brief moments other than "Vertigo" also provide a jolt. When we see Spiderman climbing a skyscraper and about to vault himself into the sky (and the theater), the Edge lets loose with a short

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melodic passage bursting with the chiming guitar sound that is his signature, a genuine roar fills the theater. A similar moment occurs in Act Two. Both are gone almost before they start, but for a moment when the audience hears the sound they associate with U2 paired with Spidey in action, they're thrilled. Here's "Rise Above" performed live on *American Idol*.

If the name of the show was the first warning sign (*Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark* remains inexplicable and dumb), hiring Bono and The Edge was the second one. Many pop stars traffic in character-driven story songs that lead you to believe they might have the talent for Broadway, which is why Billy Joel and Elton John and Paul Simon (not to mention Duncan Sheik and Nellie McKay) have proven such hot properties.

But U2 has never told stories or created vivid characters in their tunes like those others. They deal in ideas and feelings; they create classic tunes that dive into personal and idiosyncratic moments that are transformed into something universal. None of that makes them well-suited to writing songs for characters that move the plot forward. You can build a musical around any act as long-lasting and great as U2 (or Bruce Springsteen or Queen etc.), but that's not the same as asking them to write original material for a Broadway show. Bono and The Edge are ill-suited to the role and their generic material like "Bullying By Numbers," "If The World Should End" and "D.I.Y. World" prove it.

So what exactly happens in the show? Assuming you're vaguely familiar with the Spiderman comics and the great Tobey Maguire movies made from them, there are no spoilers as such to reveal. Gawky teen gets bit by radioactive spider and tries to juggle school, work as a low-paid freelance photographer and a great girlfriend with the annoying responsibility of saving the world and fighting the Green Goblin.

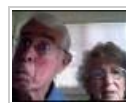
The show begins with Peter Parker (Reeve Carney) giving a report in school on the Greek myth of Arachne. A Greek chorus of women (not the Geek Chorus from the show's earlier version) appears in mid-air, swinging out towards the audience on long yellow banners of cloth. As they sing and move back and forth, horizontal bands of cloth are lowered and the women are literally weaving the cloth into a pattern in mid-air as they tell the story of Arachne, the greatest artist at looming who challenges even the gods with her talent. It's a simple, beautiful, and very theatrical effect. Very little in the show matches it for simplicity and style, but it's your first indication that if *Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark* is notable for anything, it's the sometimes chaotic but always bold and interesting set design and costumes.

Parker's classroom is also clever: it's a pop-up affair with half the classroom just a visual goof of cardboard students and desks with a slanted hallway heading towards the back of the stage. Throughout the show, we get some good nods to comic books in the design, especially the skyscrapers of New York City (presented in perhaps a dozen different ways, all of them eye-catching) right down to the "To Be Continued" visual that appears at the end of the first act.

When Peter walks home after being bullied by a UN cross-section of kids, the streets also get a nifty representation in hand-drawn backdrops that fold and re-fold to indicate different streets and perspectives as Peter walks on. It's a cool effect, though it becomes overused throughout the show until it finally seems a little lame, unfortunately. The lab for Norman Osborn/The Green Goblin is also casually

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suggestive of a big space in a fun, comic book way. A tiny little subway car rolls across a track and we get all we need to know in one scene; it's much better than the giant skyscraper and bridges that pop out and unfold themselves rather laboriously for major stunt scenes.

But by and large the scenic and production designs are engaging. The costumes, however, are generally a flop. Our first glimpse of criminals reveals your garden variety bank robber presented in an inflatable, cartoon-like costume a la Warren Beatty's *Dick Tracy*. Ok, cool. But soon we get a swarm of evil villains in cumbersome costumes like Carnage, Electro, Swiss Miss, and the like. Their costumes are so bulky they can barely move around on stage. This problem is a real drag when it comes to the Green Goblin (Patrick Page).

He's a familiar Broadway villain: kind of campy and a supposed scene-stealer. But here the Goblin's best line is a lame reference to the show's giant budget. Otherwise, he's so encumbered by his costume, he can barely walk to the front of the stage and lift his arms while minions dance around him during the big musical numbers.

A further constant problem is the miking. Because of the elaborate stunts, Spiderman and the Green Goblin are both played by numerous other actors at various points in the show while being voiced by Carney and Page off-stage. This creates an impersonal feel for much of the show, with voices booming out of nowhere clearly unrelated to the guy swinging around the theater.

Look at the scene where Peter Parker first discovers his super powers. It's one of the emotional high points in the first movie, with Tobey Maguire perfectly capturing the ecstatic glee of the moment. Now we get to see that emotion transported into song via "Bouncing Off The Walls." The technical aspects are clever, with Peter suspended by wires in his bedroom, which is represented by four or five "walls" held in place by humans mostly hidden behind them. Peter literally bounces off the walls, ping-pong back and forth. Star Reeve Carney sings the verses and then jumps here and there and everywhere. Naturally, it's impossible to do those gymnastics (sometimes upside down) and sing properly, so the chorus is handled by an offstage group of singers. But the chorus of a song is when the singer explodes with excitement. It's the hook you've been waiting for melodically. But because of the demands of the stunt, just when we want to hear Peter bursting with emotion, he has to stop singing.

I can't think of how they should have handled such demands, but this is no small issue and has a lot to do with why this show feels so emotionally distant and inert. When we want our star to burst into song, he has to remain quiet. Or when the big action scenes are taking place, we know we're often watching stand-ins and hearing voices come from backstage.

Even the webbing is a let-down. Confetti is the natural and obvious choice, but when it pops out of Spidey's wrist and just sort of gently floats down on a villain, well, you get the general idea but it's not exactly exciting. The stunts are certainly technically challenging and fun to see in a Broadway house. But they're not beautiful or emotionally important, just sort of...fun. Even that pales after the fourth or fifth time around the theater for our hero or the evil Green Goblin. You've seen more entrancing work at any Cirque Du Soleil performance, though unquestionably it was a huge challenge to deliver them over an audience night after night.

Certain elements stick out. In a goofier, more comic show, the passing moment when a building is on fire and someone shouts "My baby" in a long, drawn-out wail while a giant cardboard baby floats down only to be caught in a giant Spidey palm that pops out from off-stage in an overs-sized, cartoon style might have been truly hilarious rather than just odd and dorky.

It's tempting to call the handsome Carney bland, but why blame him for the dull songs he tries to liven up? He's certainly better than Jennifer Damiano as Mary Jane, who certainly looks the part but strains during her singing. Neither is helped by the sound, which makes many of the lyrics unintelligible, especially during big numbers where multiple people are singing at once.

In short, *Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark* is a mess, albeit a coherent mess, as opposed to earlier reviews of the show in previews. The set design is playful at times. The visuals can be striking, such as when Spidey is singing a big number and the visual flourishes of skyscrapers come fast and furious in the video displays, creating a sense of excitement otherwise missing from the tune. But just as often, the costumes and sets get in the way, weighing down the actors. The story hits all the main points of the comic and movie versions, right down to a curtain call where Spidey arrives upside down and gets to kiss Mary Jane, just like we remember from the film.

It's a pity there's nothing in this show that isn't just a pale reflection of other, better versions that came



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before. You'll leave the show wanting to watch the Sam Raimi/Tobey Maguire movies or read the comics, not because this is so good but just to remind yourself of why you cared in the first place.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

**Note:** Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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