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THE BAND'S VISIT \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

JUNK \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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ETHEL BARRYMORE THEATRE

Well here's an easy review to write. I can just copy word for word the rave I printed when *The Band's Visit* opened in December of 2016. It was a delightful surprise, like the holiday gift you didn't know you wanted until you got it. Every bit of praise for the cast, the crew, the book, the music and lyrics is just as true now on Broadway as it was Off. Whew! I can heartily recommend it to anyone who missed this gem the first time around during its too-brief one month run.

So one of the best musicals of 2016 is now one of the best musicals of 2017. And if it's not easily the best new show of the Broadway season ending next May, won't that be great news? It means another terrific, bold work must be on its way.

Based on an Israeli film, *The Band's Visit* is a quiet, droll, intimate and beguiling work. An Egyptian police band — specifically the Alexandria Ceremonial Police Orchestra — is headed to Israel to perform at a cultural center. It's a modest event but clearly a big deal to the men taking part, especially their punctilious conductor and leader Tewfiq (a delightful Tony Shalhoub). Unfortunately, a slip of the tongue in English means they buy tickets to the wrong destination. Instead of a bustling city with an Egyptian cultural center making its grand opening, they end up stranded in a tiny village in the middle of nowhere.

Stranded for the night in a town with no hotel, they are taken in by the locals, some of whom are — to be honest — quietly pleased to have something new happening for a change. People eat and drink. They play music. They go to a roller rink or a restaurant. They talk. What else can you do in Beit Hatikva? In the morning, the band goes on its way. That's it. That's enough.

Gently, sweetly, we come to know these people — both the visiting Egyptians and the locals — we come to know their heartbreak and loneliness, their kindness, their strengths and their faults. Someone's faults can be quite amusing and even appealing when you only have to deal with them for one night, when you're only discovering them for the first time. Marry this person and see that same fault again and again and yes, you might be singing a different tune. When a married couple has a fight in front of one of the musicians and tries to apologize, he says simply, "I've been married 20 years." He understands.

Every element of the show has been tightened and sharpened or subtly expanded for Broadway, from the Egyptian ringleader Shalhoub's wonderfully modulated performance (he says "No" in more different ways than Eskimos say "snow") to Katrina Lenk's magnetic turn as Dina, the owner of the town's cafe. They are both formidable in their own right as characters and actors. Shalhoub's unstoppable dignity meets Lenk's immovable, undeniable charm and sparks fly. Well, no, actually. Sparks *don't* fly — it's not a combustible romance or passionate fling we're witnessing but two adults getting to know each other and acknowledging without ever saying a word that yes, perhaps, if things were different or they'd met earlier or lived in the same city (or at least the same country) but....

Like *Once*, this musical comes in on cat's paws, so so quietly you barely notice you're smiling. When you're not smiling, you're hushed and moved as a wife reveals her frustration or a baby cries or two awkward young introverts fumblingly reach out towards one another or a man waits by a phone, believing his girlfriend will call. Such fragile pieces, I feared what Broadway might do to *Once* and *The Band's Visit*. *Once* actually flourished creatively; somehow it was meant for a bigger stage. Not *The Band's Visit*, which I would still prefer to see in

the tiny confines of its original home, as I would with almost any show in the world. Yet it has transferred with all its charm intact.

Audiences are responding and it looks set to be one of the more unexpected hits you can imagine. Like the far more banal *Come From Away* (which is also about unexpected visitors to a small town), its deep humanity is deeply appealing. It's easy to forget Egyptians and Israelis are far from boon companions, though subtle reminders are sprinkled throughout. People are not so different, these shows say. But *Come From Away* posits an easy bromide: lives are changed by the visit, romances flourish and take root and everyone insists after their brief time together is over that they'll stay in touch. And they mean it.

*The Band's Visit* is more subtle, more real. The possibility of a romance is raised and then gently set aside. The visitors come and then go and you never doubt that things will go back to normal, with perhaps someone saying, "Hey remember when that band..." being the extent of it. Why is that so moving? Because we're all just visiting, really. Because any connection you make is tenuous and fragile and shouldn't be taken for granted. And neither should a musical as intelligent and warm and sweet as this.

JUNK \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

LINCOLN CENTER THEATER

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Ayad Akhtar's latest play gets ahead of itself. *Junk* is like a sleek start-up that has a gleaming front office and charging stations in the parking lot so employees can top off their electric cars and nebulous plans for worldwide expansion...but hasn't actually nailed down the product they're going to sell. In this case, they have a gorgeous set (mostly), a sprawling and good cast, a button-pushing topic that is actually timeless (namely greed) and ambitious parallels between it and Shakespeare's history plays.

Unfortunately, Akhtar forgot the drama. He forgot characters that change and grow or at least come to understand themselves better. He forgot conflict. He forgot a tragic fall from greatness if he wanted tragedy. He forgot any emotional stakes. He forgot everything except to give an audience the comforting message that everyone in the play is dirty: the Wall Street sharks (from the young turks to the old guard), the bankers, the government officials meant to keep an eye on them, the media (of course) and even the steel workers getting the shaft who prove foolish and shortsighted. It might be discomfiting to see yourself in a play and be told you are dirty. But to be told that everyone is compromised, greedy, looking for an angle? Well what's so challenging about that?

Set in the go-go years of 1985, *Junk* charts the rapacious peak of a Wall Street titan modeled pretty much directly on the disgraced (but reformed!) Junk Bond King Michael Milken. Played by Steven Pasquale, Robert Merkin is the outrageous outsider who makes the cover of magazines and amasses a fortune of billions by taking over stodgy companies, selling off their parts and then walking away with huge profits. He makes money coming and going and usually leaves nothing but collapsed businesses in his wake. You;d hate him or hate yourself for loving him if Akhtar had brought Merken to life in some new and compelling manner.

Pasquale delivers the role with panache but it's an empty suit of a part, all verbal flourishes and no heart or even the compelling absence of a heart.

We jump in midstream when a new deal is taking shape. Sadly, the collapse of the economy in the 1980s and then the collapse again in 2008 of almost the entire world's economy has made us all tragically well versed in the shenanigans on display. Merken targets a steel mill company, a business which has diversified into pharmaceuticals. Unfortunately, for them, the steel mill is unprofitable and the drug companies are practically printing money. True, the company is investing in the mills to compete with Japan — look beyond the next quarter and they will be poised long-term for a comeback with good manufacturing jobs locked in and a solid business back where it belongs. But who can wait that long? Merken knows he can make a killing if he dives in now, loads up debt on the steel mills and sells off the juicy parts of the company to others. Who cares what happens to the people who's lives are destroyed?

That hostile takeover is not the only game in town. The watch dogs of Wall Street are closing in, turning inside traders into government witnesses who can help them work their way up the chain to the really big bad guys. Along for the ride is a journalist looking to write a book on this sordid era, a wife who can parse a balance sheet with the best of them, an ambitious government official and many more.

Don't get attached to any of them: they're all dirty. Merken is the big bad but he doesn't seem so awful when his avarice is no worse than anyone else. An investigator hoping to score headlines will gladly take Wall Street's money when running for mayor. A journalist will sleep with a source who may be decades older than

her but hey he's rich and in good shape for his age. (She'll also take a bribe to dump a book about to be published because isn't getting rich the point?) Even the old guard Wall Streeter who despises these new pirates and their love of debt and junk bonds can't be trusted — his disdain seems to be hatred of Jews and people of color as much as a distaste for their innovative financial instruments.

The cast is competent but their characters are so colorless it's hard to single anyone out. As with Wall Street itself, this is a boy's club and the few women have the weakest parts. The set by John Lee Beatty is suitably flashy but it lets down in a modest way with the bed that Merkin and his wife share: it's simply too cheap-looking to convince. Merkin might have a tackily grand bed. He might have the most luxurious and expensive bed and sheets known to man. But he wouldn't have a bed that looks like it belonged in a Day's Inn. Similarly, Teresa Avia Lim and Miriam Silverman are let down by the hair choices of Tom Watson. Surely, they would have some full-bodied 80s hair, not the straight look they display here?

Catherine Zuber's unflattering costume for Silverman as Merkin's wife is also deeply unconvincing. She's the wife of a billionaire and even if she isn't meant to be an ornamental wife there's no reason she should be dressed from the sale rack of some discount store. Those are minor cavils of a show dominated by the simple set and a lot of suits but when you're not engaged emotionally, they are the sort of details that nag at you.

*Junk* is two and a half hours but it moves briskly if dully through its paces thanks to director Doug Hughes. For a brief moment, it moves into some interesting territory. Merkin is defending his actions and stumbles on a pointed rejoinder. The stiff old fogeys of Wall Street don't hate him because of his financial skating on thin ice, he says. They hate him because they're racist — they hate Jews and people of color and anyone who isn't old and white and male. You sit up for a second at the wicked little twist this offers...until we're shown he's pretty much right. A vile self—justification becomes one more black mark for everyone involved in this drama. The finger pointing is so unrelenting you wish Akhtar had thought to challenge at least himself.

We're meant to chuckle near the end when our protagonist stumbles on the idea of subprime loans. Here we go again, Akhtar is saying. It's a pity he did it in a show Milken could probably watch without feeling the slightest bit uncomfortable.

## **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 Steggert)

Wakey Wakey \*\*\*

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

CasablancaBox \*\* 1/2

Amélie \* 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong \*\*

War Paint \*\*

In and Of Itself \*\*\*

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) \*\*

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) \*\* 1/2

Rooms \*\*

Arlington \*\*\*

All The President's Men (Public Theater one-night event at Town Hall) \*\* 1/2

Happy Days (w Dianne Wiest) \*\*\* 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret \*\*\* 1/2

The Whirligig \* 1/2

Sojourners and Her Portmanteau \*\*

Broadway By The Year 1997-2006 \*\*\*

The Boy Who Danced On Air \*\* 1/2

The Government Inspector \*\* 1/2

A Doll's House, Part 2 (with Julie White and Stephen McKinley Henderson) \*\*\*

Desperate Measures \*\*\*

The Honeymooners \*\*

People, Places & Things \*\*

M. Butterfly \* 1/2

Red Roses, Green Gold no stars

Of Thee I Sing (MasterVoices concert presentation at Carnegie Hall) \*\* 1/2

The Band's Visit (Broadway) \*\*\* 1/2

Junk \*\*

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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.***