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ENTERTAINMENT

## Theater: The 'Big Fish' That Got Away; Poor Time Killer

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**BIG FISH** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**A TIME TO KILL**\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**BIG FISH** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**NEIL SIMON THEATRE**

One holiday season years ago, my siblings were all back home. I would be there in a few days but they called me and put me on speakerphone with everyone listening. "We're having an argument," said my brother Chris, "and we need you to settle it. Just say the first thing that comes to mind. What did dad do during the war?" I answered immediately, "He was a nurse during the war, right down to the big hat with wings that jutted out on the side, like the nuns wore." Everyone burst out laughing while I heard my dad good-naturedly exclaiming, "I never said that!"

But of course he had, along with a million other stories, some true, many with a grain of truth and more than a few completely untrue but fun and why let facts get in the way of a good story? My father dined and drank with everyone from the Pointer Sisters (probably true, since he barely knew who they were) to Jackie Gleason. He studied acting under Lee Strasberg. (Maybe, since he says it amounted to a few lessons, Strasberg told him he was terrible and that was it.) He dated actresses, including Constance Towers and Jean Peters (who starred in *Pickup On South Street* but is best known for having married Howard Hughes). A Texas husband and wife -- millionaires in oil, I assume but definitely millionaires -- wanted to adopt him when they met my dad while he worked at the Commodore Hotel in New York City. His boss showered dad with tickets to every sporting event and show in town though I can't imagine my dad at a Broadway musical, much less the opera. It was the hotel for athletes, so my dad met every sports star under the sun at that time...and then went out drinking with them of course. He could make up songs about anything on the spot, thrilling children who begged him to write them down because they were so good. If an adult was listening, they would understand why he didn't bother to write down the lyrics and melodies to originals like "Singin' In The Rain." He hated music but was constantly humming songs. His family owned the rights to land in Chicago where the stockyards are built and if only we could find the original deed (placed in a family Bible since lost) we'd be rich. That's what he gets for not reading the Bible regularly... or at all.

He traveled the world and you can name any city, state or country and he'd immediately insist he knew someone who lived there, a great friend who would *love* to put you up if you were traveling through. Many years ago, before most of the people he met started dying off, it might even have been true. He lived all over Asia, was friends with drug smugglers in the Virgin Islands, worked for big corporations, launched small businesses and somewhere in Hong Kong there might be a safety deposit box containing...gold? Jewels? Deeds or other valuables? Or perhaps just information on his career as a spy. Last

month, one of my siblings said he hinted for the first time at involvement in the Kennedy assassination. But he lived in Bermuda at the time, I said. Well, then the *planning* of the Kennedy assassination. If I take my dad to dinner, he'll never stop talking. But he would be just as likely -- make that more likely -- to be talking to the waiter, the bartender, the people at the table two seats away than to actually talk to me. He's 86 years old and so frail that this morning he fell down on the sidewalk trying to walk from his car to a restaurant.

In short, if you're making a Broadway musical about a son whose father is dying and has spent his entire life spinning tall tales rather than opening up and sharing the truth, by God, I'm your audience.

The musical *Big Fish* is filled with talent on stage and off but it doesn't remotely begin to tell the frustrating, bitter, sweet tale delivered in the novel by Daniel Wallace. Like the film version by Tim Burton, this show thinks the real magic is in the tall tales that Edward Bloom (Norbert Leo Butz) tells to his wife Sandra (Kate Baldwin), his son Will (Bobby Steggert) or anyone that will listen. But in fact the few brief moments of emotion and charm occur in the quiet real world scenes where Will is comforting his dying father or Sandra expresses her devotion in "I Don't Need A Roof." The fantasy scenes, the tall tales, the too-good-to-be-true stories? They're only fun if you haven't heard them a hundred times before.



Unlike the film, this take on the story clearly shows the frustrating part of such a charming father. Edward takes over his son's wedding, interrupts their first dance and even jumps the gun by announcing his new daughter in law (Krystal Joy Brown) is pregnant. Will is furious and wishes for once -- just for once -- his dad would stop spinning tales and just tell the truth. The rest of the show is filled with the dad's fanciful stories and the son's desire to learn the truth about his dad's mysterious past.

It's telling that every time we cut to one of those magical tales that the show stops cold: dad meets a witch, befriends a giant, joins a circus, saves a town and none of it is engaging or interesting. That's the point of the book. Those tales are fun to outsiders but in fact they're simply a way of opening up and being honest, of engaging with reality. That's precisely why they appeal to strangers and drive family members crazy. There's a flip side: the tales can inspire imagination and creativity; they can open a mind the possibilities of the wide world. It takes Will the entire show to realize his dad really did love him and was proud of his son. That's good, but it doesn't change the fact that his dad has to make every moment about himself, steal the spotlight and avoid anything remotely approaching a heartfelt conversation when it matters.

The book is by John August, who made similar mistakes on the screenplay. The music and lyrics are by Andrew Lippa but despite the best cast one could hope for, they rarely soar. Perhaps the most unfortunate element is the scenic design by Julian Crouch that combines with the projection design of Benjamin Percy for 59 Productions. The basic framework are wooden slats, which are fine for the small town country home where we begin. But they're terribly distracting and unattractive when it comes to the cave of the giant or New York City (even Central Park looks more urban than that) and pretty much every other setting for the story.

"The Witch," where Edward meets a witch and sees the future, looks like an outtake from *Into The Woods* and is murky and ineffective. The Calloway Circus and its performers seem to have wandered over from *Pippin* (the costumes are by the esteemed William Ivey Long). And the act one finale "Daffodils" includes a field of daffodils that is underwhelming if modestly pretty as they pop up awkwardly out of the stage floor.

It's a dreadful shame Kate Baldwin and Bobby Steggert aren't starring on Broadway in *Giant*, the excellent musical they starred in at the Public but which has yet to transfer. Instead, they have fairly uninteresting parts. Baldwin is especially woeful as the long-suffering wife of Edward. The first time she meets Edward is one of the most effective numbers in the show because it's actually about something. But by and large she has nothing to do. Steggert, one of the best talents in theater today, brings immediate empathy to a role that can sometimes seem like a pill. (Everyone gets annoyed when Will can't realize what great fun his dad is!) But you immediately trust Steggert's heart is in the right place and he sings and acts beautifully. What little emotion is present is due in no small part to him. Zachary Unger is quite good as the young Will, too.

Susan Stroman directs with her usual fluidity but the heart of the story was never there to begin with. Her choreography, usually so dependable, is not called on much here. An opening bit called "The Alabama Stomp" (Edward insists it makes fish jump right out of the river) is diverting but turns out to be the dancing highlight. A flashy number at the top of act two -- a U.S.O. number called "Red, White And True" (performed to the hilt by Baldwin) is the very definition of a time-waster both in song and dance. Like so many of the other songs, it just stalls the story and fills the stage with one of Edward's tales that doesn't really advance the story or our understanding of Edward.

Then there's Butz, who sings and dances and does everything he can to land this *Big Fish*. But pointless songs that go nowhere and fantasy sequences with no purpose can't come to life even with his formidable skills. He's such an opaque character that in a way he becomes less interesting as the show goes on.

The fact that Edward is given a real secret -- one that seems utterly pointless, by the way (is he really afraid his wife might find out that he *didn't* cheat on her once?) -- cheapens the whole musical by the way. The truth is not that Edward and men like him are spinning stories for very good reasons. This constant distancing between him and reality is a flaw, not a noble pursuit. But they can't change, not really. The truth is not that they're more lovable and noble than you realize; it's that you have to learn to accept and love them anyway.

**A TIME TO KILL\*** 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**GOLDEN THEATRE**

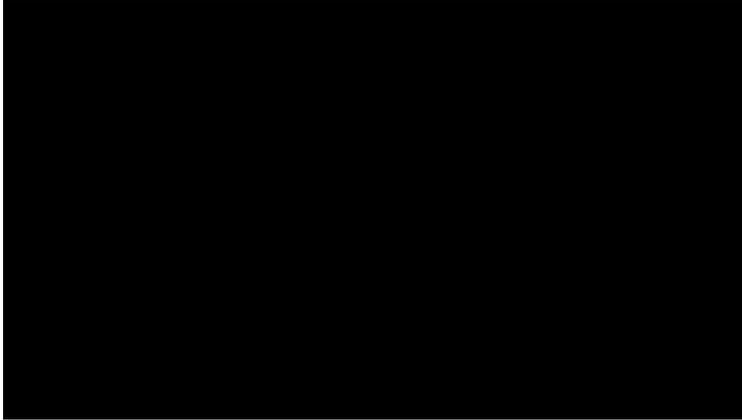
I enjoy a good old-fashioned courtroom drama as much as the next fellow. And I prepared for this show by reading John Grisham's debut novel -- it's clearly a young man's work filled with every possible plot twist and stakes-raising event you could ask for. But it's also richer and more nuanced than most of his legal thrillers and you can see why it's the favorite of Grisham and his fans. The feature film helped launch the career of Matthew McConaughey but barely scratched the service of the vivid cast of characters in this tale of rape and Southern justice.

So I was eagerly prepared to say if you wanted to kill some time that this new play might be a fun way to do it. Unfortunately, despite some clever touches by playwright Rupert Holmes towards the finale, this Broadway production also fails to capture the best parts of the book, not to mention fails in casting, production design, score and even a decent Southern accent.

The time is the early 1980s and our story begins with an act of horrific violence: two drunken, hateful white men brutally beat and rape a ten-year-old black girl. They are immediately arrested by the town's black sheriff (Chike Johnson in a part that mainly calls for him to change his clothes a lot) and one of them confesses to the crime they committed. But the child's father Carl Lee Hailey (John Douglas Thompson) is mad with

rage. While his daughter is in the hospital recovering from the nightmarish assault, he gets a gun and kills the two men.

Enter our young, idealistic attorney Jake Brigance (Sebastian Arcelus) who must somehow get this decent family man set free. Everyone agrees if the father were white and the rapists black that he'd probably get a medal instead of facing capital punishment. Nonetheless, that's exactly what waits him if Jake can't pull some magic. Adding to the drama is district attorney Rufus R. Buckley (Patrick Page) who has his eye on the governor's mansion, a gruff judge (Fred Dalton Thompson), an eager beaver assistant (Ashley Williams) who's smart as a whip and quite a temptation while Jake's wife and daughter are way, and a drunken mentor (Tom Skerritt) with an even drunker expert witness in tow (John Procaccino). That doesn't even cover the KKK, civil rights protestors, death threats, burning crosses and much more. No one would accuse Grisham or Holmes of being skimpy on plot.



The problems are apparent from the start: the show begins with frantic video of a country road and the voice of a little girl calling for her daddy. The handsome courtroom by James Noone has wood paneling stretching up to the roof and a rotating stage so we can get slightly different perspectives of the rather static set up (you can't mess too much with tables for the attorneys, a witness stand and so on). Unfortunately, it's dominated by video footage that covers the top half of the stage during transitions.

Designed by Jeff Sugg, these videos are thoroughly unnecessary attempts to create a feel for the setting and hint at the massive turmoil outside the courtroom where a trickle of protestors turns into an NAACP-driven flood and the arrival of KKKers sparks a riot. On top of that, they're muddy and unattractive. This mostly courtroom-based drama fails at recreating the media frenzy and huge crowds that dominate the imagination of the novel. Flashing country homes and vague imagery of burning buildings only emphasizes how cut off from this drama we are.

The score and sound design by Lindsay Jones leans heavily on slide guitar for a Southern feel. Fair enough, but this is a tale about the rape of a little girl and a man facing execution: the score is at times so jaunty from scene to scene you'd think we're headed to a juke joint on Saturday night.

Poor Arcelus starred in the musical *Elf*, where he had the thankless task of being in the shadow of Will Ferrell's career-best turn as a naive man who thinks he's one of Santa's little helpers. Now he's asked to take on a role given life by the sexy charm and guile of McConaughey. He barely handles the accent (few on stage do) and is capable but little more. Tom Skerritt is an excellent actor and in the novel the role of Jake's mentor is a rich one. It's far less interesting here and the night I caught the show Skerritt notably stumbled over his lines at numerous points (playing a drunk is no cover).

Fred Dalton Thompson handles the no-nonsense Judge Noose (hey, blame Grisham for the name) well though with no notable Southern twinkle. It's not his fault that in the book the judge is much more interesting, thanks to a cowardly fear of being second-guessed and a constant supply of drink (hinted at in the opening scene). As the father and mother of

the poor little girl, John Douglas Thompson and Tonya Pinkins add immeasurably to the show. They have just a few very brief scenes together but those are the only moments when the import of what has happened actually sink in. It's almost cruel to cast the great Pinkins in such a minor role; at least Thompson (an excellent actor in a thin part) has more stage time.

I've saved the worst and best for last. Ashley Williams is the eager assistant to Jake. She has a string of TV credits to her name, but the stage is clearly not her forte. She can't project her voice, move across the stage or deliver a single line with the slightest conviction. It's hard to understand how she got the part. It's impossible to understand how she kept it.

The sole pleasure in the show is Patrick Page, who burst into prominence for the public by playing the villain in the woebegone musical *Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark*. Here he is wonderful as the politically savvy lawyer Rufus R. Buckley. Everyone who acts across from him is instantly better and more interesting. His asides to the jury, his opening and closing arguments, his play-acting when he provokes the father into a moment of anger are criminally fun. Page is good enough to be remembered come Tony time, though by then I fear the show will be long gone.

I appreciated some of the clever telescoping accomplished by Rupert Holmes, who has had one fo the more curious, entertaining careers around, ranging from "Escape (The Pina Colada Song)" to the musical *The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* and the TV series *Remember WENN*. A sentimental low-point in the novel is a reported scene in the jury room that sways the verdict. In the film, it was put into the mouth of Jake, which was even more risible. Here, Holmes has cleverly worked it into the closing arguments in a way that proves our hero outsmarting Buckley. Other similar tweaks were wise as well. (Though when I read the book and saw this play I had the same impulse: why not put the expert witness back on the stand to defend himself? It's ripe for drama and would turn the jury against Buckley if the story came from a tearful old man rather than Jake.)

But the main mistake I think was not to commit to one vision. The novel is epic in its way and certainly episodic. It's also a young man's work filled with so much incident it could only be captured in a miniseries which would also do justice to the wide cast of characters (like the showdown between Jake, the family and the local preachers that is a high point of the book). But on stage they try to have it both ways: sticking mainly to the courtroom and hinting at the massive public outcry roiling their small town. Better to stick even more firmly to the courtroom. Better to have shown the judge firm in court and craven and fearful in chambers. Better to have milked the drama there for all its worth rather than stepping outside for brief climaxes like a man trying to blow up Jake's home or the later scene where it's set on fire and is shown rather tackily in the shape of a burning cross in case we missed the point about racism.

For most theatergoers, they'll be better off reading the novel and tackling *Sycamore Row*, the sequel he's written after all these years. If the Broadway production of *A Time To Kill* did nothing but give Grisham an incentive to return to his most ambitious and literary effort, his fans may be pleased with it after all.

#### **THE THEATER OF 2013** (on a four star scale)

*The Other Place* \*\* 1/2

*Picnic* \* 1/2

*Opus No. 7* \*\* 1/2

*Deceit* \* 1/2

*Life And Times Episodes 1-4* \*\*

*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (w Scarlett Johansson) \* 1/2

*The Jammer* \*\*\*

*Blood Play* \*\* 1/2

*Manilow On Broadway* \*\* 1/2

*Women Of Will* \*\* 1/2

*All In The Timing* \*\*\*

*Isaac's Eye* \*\*\*  
*Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery* \*\* 1/2  
*The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County* \* 1/2  
*Much Ado About Nothing* \*\*\*  
*Really Really* \*  
*Parsifal at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Madrid* \* 1/2  
*The Wild Bride at St. Ann's* \*\* 1/2  
*Passion at CSC* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Carousel at Lincoln Center* \*\*\*  
*The Revisionist* \*\*  
*Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella* \*\*\*  
*Rock Of Ages* \* 1/2  
*Ann* \*\* 1/2  
*Old Hats* \*\*\*  
*The Flick* \*\*\*  
*Detroit '67* \*\* 1/2  
*Howling Hilda* reading \* (Mary Testa \*\*\*)  
*Hit The Wall* \*  
*Breakfast At Tiffany's* \* 1/2  
*The Mound Builders* at Signature \*  
*Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Cirque Du Soleil's Totem* \*\*\*  
*The Lying Lesson* \* 1/2  
*Hands On A Hardbody* \*  
*Kinky Boots* \*\*  
*Matilda The Musical* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream* \*\*\*  
*Motown: The Musical* \*\*  
*La Ruta* \*\* 1/2  
*The Big Knife* \*  
*The Nance* \*\*\*  
*The Assembled Parties* \*\* 1/2  
*Jekyll & Hyde* \* 1/2  
*Thoroughly Modern Millie* \*\* 1/2  
*Macbeth w Alan Cumming* \*  
*Orphans* \*\* 1/2  
*The Testament Of Mary* \*\* 1/2  
*The Drawer Boy* \*\*  
*The Trip To Bountiful* \*\*\*  
*I'll Eat You Last* \*\* 1/2  
*Pippin* \*  
*This Side Of Neverland* \*\*\*  
*A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney* \*\*\*  
*Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812* \*\*\*  
*Colin Quinn Unconstitutional* \*\* 1/2  
*A Family For All Occasions* \*  
*The Weir* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Disney's The Little Mermaid* \*\*  
*Far From Heaven* \*\*  
*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* \*\*  
*Somewhere Fun* \*\*  
*Venice* no stars  
*Reasons To Be Happy* \*\*  
*STePz* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Comedy of Errors* (Shakespeare In The Park) \*\*\*  
*Roadkill* \*\* 1/2  
*Forever Tango* \*\*\*  
*Monkey: Journey To The West* \*\* 1/2

*The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson* \*\*  
*NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes* \* 1/2  
*NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream* \*\*  
*NYMF: Mother Divine* \*\*  
*NYMF: Julian Po* \*\* 1/2  
*NYMF: Marry Harry* \*\*  
*NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist* \*\* 1/2  
*NYMF: Castle Walk* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Crossing Swords* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Bend In The Road* \*\*\* 1/2  
*NYMF: Homo The Musical* no stars  
*NYMF: Volleygirls* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Murder For Two* \*\*  
*Let it Be* \*\*  
*The Cheaters Club* \*  
*All The Faces Of The Moon* \*  
*Women Or Nothing* \*\* 1/2  
*Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play* \* 1/2  
*You Never Can Tell* \*\*\*  
*Romeo And Juliet* \*  
*Arguendo* \*\*  
*August Wilson's American Century Cycle* \*\*\*\*  
*The Glass Menagerie* \*\* 1/2  
*Lady Day* \* 1/2  
*Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse* \*\*\*\*  
*Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical* \*\* 1/2  
*Bronx Bombers* \* 1/2  
*Romeo & Juliet* at CSC \* 1/2  
*A Night With Janis Joplin* \*\*  
*The Winslow Boy* \*\*\*  
*Juno And The Paycock* \*\*  
*How I Learned To Drive* \*\*  
*Fun Home* \*\*  
*Two Boys* at the Met \*\*  
**Big Fish** \*\*  
**A Time To Kill** \* 1/2

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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.

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