
Theater: *The Flick* and *Detroit '67* Promise; *Hit the Wall* Lets Down *Stonewall*

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THE FLICK ***

DETROIT '67 ** 1/2

HIT THE WALL *

THE FLICK ***

PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZON

I've never worked at a movie theater but I'm enough of a cinema buff to realize the appeal for a summer or two, especially at a multiplex. You can gorge on movies, seeing the really good ones multiple times in between the annoying bother of sweeping up trash and tearing tickets. Movie fanatic Avery (the excellent Aaron Clifton Moten) has higher standards. He goes to work at a rundown one-screen movie theater in the summer of 2012 because it's one of the last in Massachusetts that still shows 35 mm films instead of digital projection.

In Annie Baker's sweet, sad new play, it's no surprise Avery finds himself surrounded by oddballs, including green-haired projectionist Rose (Louisa Krause) and the older Sam (Matthew Maher). For Avery, this is just a fill-in job. For Rose and Sam, working at this dilapidated palace is what they do. They might want to vet Avery and make sure he's cool enough, but the fact is that Sam and Rose are so lonely that any new face, any new possibility for friendship and a way to beat the boredom of their work is too precious to pass up. They soon befriend Avery, let him in on the "tradition" of skimming a little money from the till and splitting it three ways and battle each other for his attention.

Not to worry because Avery fits right in. He's an odd duck, clearly a sad and awkward guy with an encyclopedic knowledge of cinema. In one of the play's best scenes, he and Sam are cleaning out the theater while Sam tries to stump him with the Six Degrees game where you link two actors via as few films as possible. With his nerdy smarts, quiet smile and affable if awkward nature, the shy Avery proves an ideal addition to the group and Rose is soon angling for a date, even though we know Sam really likes her a lot.

The scenic and costume design by David Zinn is impeccable. The audience comes into the theater and sees rows of movie seats and a projectionist booth through a glass window in the back. It looks like a movie theater that was last renovated about 1982. As the actors stroll the aisles, sweeping up popcorn kernels and the like, the sense of peeking into their workaday existence is complete. The lighting by Jane Cox and sound design by Bray Poor (which includes snippets of actual films scores, I assume, since there is no composer credit) also contribute to capturing the drudgery.





However, the intentional flabbiness of the early part of this three-hour play eventually gives way to some unintentional flabbiness by the end. We don't need three hours to capture the dullness of their job; Baker, her excellent cast and director Sam Gold do that very efficiently. And we don't need an entirely new character added in towards the end to no effect (Alex Hanna) or a drawn-out finale that doesn't even give Rose her due. Further, Avery is burdened with all sorts of drama in his backstory: he's suicidal, has a mother who abandoned him and is almost autistic in his inability to respond to physical intimacy. It's far too much when simply his love of movies was enough to motivate Avery to spend the summer at the theater and his nerdy loneliness was enough to let him fit in. Despite this drama overload, Moten is subtle and memorable throughout.

So it has flaws. (Who hasn't seen a Hollywood movie in the last few years and immediately suggested cuts?) But it also has three very good actors and some winning dialogue. Maher is one of the treats of the New York theater scene. Like a Warner Bros. character actor who appears in film after film in key turns, Maher has a distinctive voice and style you always welcome. But he's also deceptively versatile, covering comedy and drama and tragedy with aplomb, playing both the very smart and the very dumb with skill and heart. His scene declaring his love to Rose is one of the more affecting of the year so far. In the least distinctive part, Krause manages to create a quirky, real person from the standard rebellion of Rose, mining her deadpan demeanor for laughter, doing a nutty dance that rightly draws applause and beautifully dealing with some awkward moments of frustrated intimacy. When Rose is missing from the final scenes, it feels wrong.

I don't need a happy ending. In fact, I kind of wanted *The Flick* to end before one final exchange between Avery and Sam. I think that would have been truer to the transitory nature of these sorts of jobs and the sad fate for Sam, to whom this job is a career. But one thing is clear: Annie Baker has found her career and it's one to watch with eagerness.

P.S. Macaulay Culkin to Michael Caine? Macaulay Culkin to Daniel Stern in *Home Alone*. Daniel Stern to Michael Caine in *Hannah And Her Sisters*.

DETROIT '67 ** 1/2

PUBLIC THEATER

Like *The Flick*, the new drama *Detroit '67* is by a talented playwright, in this case Dominique Morisseau. Both pieces have their flaws (*The Flick* is a little too ungainly and long; *Detroit '67* a little too conventional in its storyline). But both artists have created vivid characters we want to spend time with and both are rewarded by excellent casts that bring those characters to life. The writers may have room to grow in terms of structure, but when you can bring people to life, actors will flock to perform your work and you'll find the opportunities you need to work and refine and reach greatness.

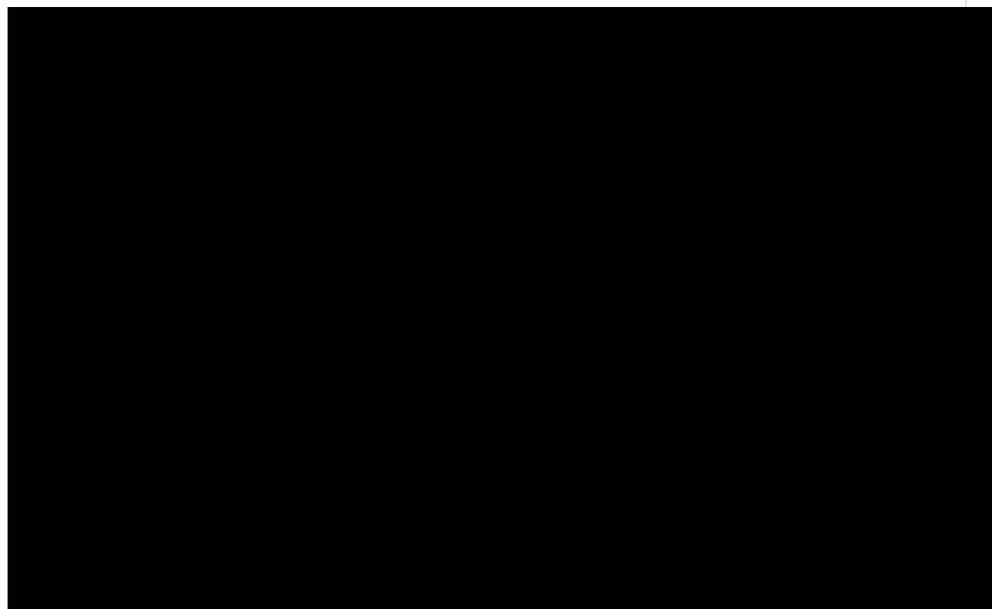
Obviously, *Detroit '67* takes place in Detroit right before the city exploded in anger after too much police brutality and racism. It's usually called the Detroit Riots though Morisseau prefers The Great Rebellion.

But rebellion is not fomenting in the home of Chelle (Michelle Wilson) and her brother

Lank (Francois Battiste). They certainly had socially conscious parents who encouraged these people to be free thinkers and decorate their basement with art, including Chelle's modern art-like graphic designs, Lank's (short for Langston as in Hughes) drawing of his sister and their dad's black power fist, not to mention posters and photos of iconic black figures like Malcolm X and Diana Ross. Chelle and Lank run an after-hours joint that is opening up for business again. Chelle wants to play it safe with their legacy, the home they own and the money they have socked away. She wants a stable home for her son studying at Tuskegee.

Lank has bigger dreams, exemplified by the massive 8-track machine he and best buddy Sly (a very good Brandon J. Dirden) have just purchased. Yes, their record player keeps skipping and the 8-track player will make them stand out from the competition. But Chelle is not surprised when she hears the real reason for the purchase: Lank wants to spend their inheritance on acquiring a local bar so they can go legit. That 8-track player belongs in a bar, not a basement.

Toss in Chelle's sexy friend Bunny (De'adre Aziza) and you've got yourself a play. In fact, the violence outside is an almost unnecessary backdrop to the struggle between Chelle and Lank over playing it safe or gambling on a brighter future.



Unfortunately, we do have the riots simmering in the background and -- even more distracting -- the wholly unconvincing plot device of Caroline (Samantha Soule), a white girl Lank discovers wandering down the highway in a daze, bundles into his car, brings home, gives her shelter and demands his sister do the same. Caroline is on the run from crooked cops but also proves a deft bartender, one of the big draws of their social club. So despite the risks, Chelle allows her to stay for a little while, just long enough for Lank to fall in love.

Soule can do little with this poor excuse for a catalyst and flounders a bit in her big scene, repeatedly slapping her hands on her side and gesticulating wildly to indicate emotion. But the other actors fare much better, even when the story goes down its predictable paths. Aziza has easy laughs as the earthy, blunt Bunny, having fun as she makes a half-hearted attempt at helping Chelle fold laundry. (Domesticity is not her strong suit.) She's a type but Aziza makes her a particular type and her easy rapport with Lank is very convincing. Battiste holds his own among these formidable women, even as Lank must speechify again and again. Dirden (so good in Signature's revival of *The Piano Lesson*) is equally sparkling here. The scene where Sly finally gets Chelle to take him seriously as a potential romance is the quietly steamy high point of the evening.

And Wilson as Chelle is excellent. She lists only regional credits so I assume this is her New York debut. It's an auspicious one; Wilson is vivid, intelligent, appealing and fierce as

Chelle. The entire cast led by director Kwame Kwei-Armah has delivered this piece in as ideal a manner as Morisseau could hope for.

HIT THE WALL *
BARROW STREET THEATRE

Has there ever been a great work of art inspired by Stonewall? We've had a bad indie film or two and some other awkward plays. That trend continues with *Hit The Wall*, a work that came from Chicago loaded with good reviews but proves painfully cliched and tired. Somehow, mounting it just steps from where the actual riots took place that helped launch the modern gay rights movement feels a little galling. Maybe you can do this in the heartland, but in Greenwich Village if you want the right to tell this story you better do it brilliantly.

Hit The Wall by Ike Holter can't even settle for competent. The amateurish writing sounds like something kids in high school would create after reading about Stonewall and wanting to turn it into a stage play. It's earnest and painfully well-intentioned, but also obvious in every way. A staging by director Eric Hoff that hopes to create an electric, *Hair*-like experience by letting the actors bound around and improv their asses off (which must be more fun than doing the actual dialogue) can't begin to mask the hollow nature of the script and ultimately proves wearying.

The story hardly bears worth repeating: a gaggle of gays of varying ethnic stripes and stages of coming out converge on Greenwich Village and are all at Stonewall the night the riots occurred. You've got your fierce drag queen, closeted businessmen, vicious cops, politically empowered lesbians of color, butch lesbians who dress like boys and of course a blond newbie who just wants to lose his virginity.

In this context, no one can give a genuinely good performance. But it's a credit to the actors that you can believe many of them would be capable of it under better circumstances. Nathan Lee Graham plays Carson, the drag queen mourning the death of Judy Garland. He's a pro who has appeared in far better works and somehow manages to maintain his dignity here. As Peg, the mannish-dressing lesbian, Rania Salem Manganaro actually finds some quiet drama early on. Gregory Haney and Arturo Soria try but can't do much of anything with the finger-snapping queens who sit on a stoop and talk trash all day long. Their sassiness is dialed up to 11 from the very start and rarely pauses for breath. (And the Spanish dialogue of Soria is unfortunate pidgin Spanish, ungrammatical nonsense so often found in plays written by people not fluent in Spanish.)

Sean Allan Krill has the funniest moments of the play as an "A-Gay," a highly desirable straight-acting man who has a set come-on to whomever he wants to pick up that's hilariously blunt, ending with the firm declaration, "You have five seconds." But why the play pauses mid-riot to chide him for his superficiality is beyond me; we haven't even won basic rights and already we're criticizing each other's commitment to the cause? And thank you to the very fit Nick Bailey as the Newbie. The scene where he stripped off his clothes and dashed across the stage -- twice -- was unquestionably the highlight of the evening.

The actors are repeatedly asked to chant, "I was there! I was there!" but unfortunately you're never convinced of this even for a moment.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) ****

Chimichangas And Zolof *

Closer Than Ever ***

Cock ** 1/2

Harvey with Jim Parsons *

My Children! My Africa! ***

Once On This Island ***

Potted Potter *
Storefront Church ** 1/2
Title And Deed ***
Picture Incomplete (NYMF) **
Flambe Dreams (NYMF) **
Rio (NYMF) **
The Two Month Rule (NYMF) *
Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2
Stealing Time (NYMF) **
Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2
Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ***
Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2
How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2
Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***
Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2
Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2
Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2
Living With Henry (NYMF) *
A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2
The Last Smoker In America **
Gore Vidal's The Best Man (w new cast) ***
Into The Woods at Delacorte ** 1/2
Bring It On: The Musical **
Bullet For Adolf *
Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc. **
Harrison, TX ***
Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck" (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Pink Milk (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Who Murdered Love (FringeNYC) no stars
Storytime With Mr. Buttermen (FringeNYC) **
#MormonInChief (FringeNYC) **
An Interrogation Primer (FringeNYC) ***
An Evening With Kirk Douglas (FringeNYC) *
Sheherizade (FringeNYC) **
The Great Pie Robbery (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Independents (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
The Dick and The Rose (FringeNYC) **
Magdalen (FringeNYC) ***
Bombsheltered (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Paper Plane (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Rated M For Murder (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Mallory/Valerie (FringeNYC) *
Non-Equity: The Musical! (FringeNYC) *
Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
City Of Shadows (FringeNYC) ***
Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking ***
Salamander Starts Over (FringeNYC) ***
Pieces (FringeNYC) *
The Train Driver ***
Chaplin The Musical * 1/2
Detroit ** 1/2
Heartless at Signature **
Einstein On The Beach at BAM ****
Red-Handed Otter ** 1/2
Marry Me A Little **
An Enemy Of The People ** 1/2
The Old Man And The Old Moon *** 1/2
A Chorus Line at Papermill ***
Helen & Edgar ***

Grace * 1/2
Cyrano de Bergerac **
Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? ***
Disgraced **
Annie ** 1/2
The Heiress **
Checkers ** 1/2
Ivanov ***
Golden Child at Signature ** 1/2
Giant at the Public *** 1/2
Scandalous * 1/2
Forever Dusty **
The Performers **
The Piano Lesson at Signature *** 1/2
Un Ballo In Maschera at the Met *** 1/2 (singing) * (production) so call it ** 1/2
A Christmas Story: The Musical **
The Sound Of Music at Papermill ***
My Name Is Asher Lev *** 1/2
Golden Boy **
A Civil War Christmas ** 1/2
Dead Accounts **
The Anarchist *
Glengarry Glen Ross **
Bare **
The Mystery Of Edwin Drood ** 1/2
The Great God Pan ** 1/2
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 *

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 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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