

Theater: The Lion Roars (With Pride); Tupac Doesn't Bloom on Broadway in Holler

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THE LION *** out of ****

HOLLER IF YA HEAR ME * 1/2 out of ****

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MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT NEW YORK CITY CENTER

This one-man musical written by and starring [Benjamin Scheuer](#) is sweet, unassuming, very tuneful and very good. But you don't want to overpraise it. It's a charmer people will enjoy the most if they let it sneak up on them. It's worth seeing, I've casually told some friends, definitely the best new musical I've seen so far this year. Then they'll go, start to smile when they realize it's going to be good and then relax into the rare pleasure of seeing a show that is unexpectedly very good indeed.

The staging is simplicity itself. Scheuer comes out looking casually snazzy in a blue suit, walking onto the intimate stage of The Studio at Stage II, which is filled with various guitars, mostly acoustic. He starts to play the song you can hear a portion of in the video below and music fans will immediately relax: Scheuer is a confident guitarist and a canny songwriter who makes songs as casual as conversation but as well-crafted as can be.

Looming over the tale of his life is a father that Scheuer looked up to and feared a little. His father was an academic but loved to play the guitar. Scheuer took to playing immediately and wanted nothing more than to play guitar like his dad. "Don't be stupid!" snaps his dad, getting angry at the little boy and storming off. Not to worry: this is not a tale where Scheuer works his way through each guitar on stage, with each instrument introducing a new chapter. Nor is it a tale of parental abuse or some monstrous secret. His father suffered from depression and died suddenly when Scheuer was young and while the boy doesn't quite escape the shadow of the man that formed him, he slowly realizes he doesn't need to, not really.

There's much more. Scheuer falls in and out of love, faces a medical crisis, and strives to maintain a relationship with his mother and siblings. Our sense of who he is and how he relates to everyone else takes subtle shifts throughout the show. He's modest, funny, unsparing on himself and ultimately generous of spirit to all involved. But above all, there are the songs, whether they're rockish love songs written for a girlfriend he plays on electric guitar or tunes his father taught him or his own defiant celebrations of life.

They flow out of this confident, engaging performer with ease. The lighting design by Ben Stanton is empathetic throughout, never calling attention to itself but a signal part of the show that makes use of the warm setting provided by Neil Patel. Director Sean Daniels keeps the pacing spot-on. By the end you grow appreciative of the floppy head of hair Scheuer is sporting. You may notice how he came out in a suit but first off comes his jacket and then the tie and then the suspenders are lowered, the shoes and socks come off and you see a man opening himself up to you, emotionally naked if not quite so in reality.

If you're like me, you'll want to check out his music released under [the moniker Escapist Papers](#). If you're like my female guest, you might wonder if he's still single. And you'll want to tell your friends to check out The Lion. It's good, you'll say casually. You should go.

HOLLER IF YA HEAR ME * 1/2 out of ****
PALACE THEATRE

It's taken Broadway many, many years to find a way to celebrate rock n roll and pop. Mostly, that's happened as nostalgia, whether it's Grease or Mamma Mia or The Who's Tommy, with rare exceptions like Green Day's American Idiot the exception. If original Broadway shows have rock n roll in their DNA -- I'm thinking of Spring Awakening and to a lesser degree the barely rock-ish Rent -- it's still musical theater that is the dominant gene.

So clearly hip-hop in general and rap in particular may take a lot longer to handle the transition to the Great White Way with ease. The musical Holler If You Hear Me is clearly well-intentioned to the core. But Broadway would probably embrace a show about the Sugarhill Gang or Run DMC a lot more easily than someone as complex and fresh as the late Tupac Shakur.

One problem: it uses the lyrics of Shakur but often gives them new musical settings to tell an anonymous story of ghetto life. Those shows I mentioned before that worked? They may not have been truly "rock and roll," but they loved that music unabashedly and did their best to recreate it onstage. This show with a book by Todd Kreidler and orchestration and arrangements by Daryl Waters has a split personality when it comes to the songs. Sometimes they try to turn Shakur's lyrics into the basis for a classic Broadway duet ("Unconditional Love") and sometimes they sort of don't. Either approach could work. The two most memorable numbers are the most rap-like "Holler If Ya Hear Me" (presented with ferocious conviction and the volume turned up to 11) and in a way the least, "Thugz Mansion" (which is given a gentle, effective acoustic setting akin to a version Shakur did himself). Either approach could work, but trying both or more often falling somewhere in between most assuredly does not.

The story is painfully familiar, both in the sense of grinding poverty and few choices inevitably pointing people towards desperation and violence and in the sense of stereotypical. John is out of prison after years of refusing all visitors and cutting himself off from everyone. Not surprisingly, he discovers his best friend and his girl have started dating. Whatever. He just wants to get a job, cash a check and pay his rent. Before you know it, his best friend's kid brother Benny is senselessly shot down and people are calling for revenge so Benny's death can mean something.

Will the kid with a gift for art like John go down the path of a thug? Will they gun down a stranger in payback? Will John stay on the straight and narrow? Ultimately, very little happens except for an accidental tragedy at the climax, adding to the aimless nature of the story. Matters aren't helped by a very inexpensive production design that amounts mostly to a few stools that are pushed around the stage here and there in an effort to create some

sort of change of scene or choreography that feels dreadfully dated. Typically, one of the show's biggest numbers right before the finale is "California Love," a huge production with a purple Cadillac and most of the cast dancing around in this celebration of that state, even though the show isn't set there, no one is heading there and it is essentially a time-waster.

John is resolutely done with gang violence for most of the show..until he isn't (I've no idea why unless it's pique over being bullheaded with his co-worker/boss at an auto body shop), starts to arrange a showdown and then abruptly changes his mind again. Other plot twists and big numbers don't register. Benny's death means little since the show has just begun. Later, Vertus, the brother of the just-murdered Benny and best friend to John, sings one of Shakur's signature songs "Dear Mama" to his mother at the end of Act One. Since the great Tonya Pinkins has had about two lines as his mother, this ode to a character we've barely met hardly registers either, especially since the show is halfway over.

Director Kenny Leon is enjoying one of the triumphs of his career with the acclaimed, Tony-winning revival of *A Raisin In The Sun*. Here so much is wrong that it's hard to know where to begin, though clearly from inception it was as muddled a mess as the ugly poster that's both afraid of what the show is about and yet clumsily striving for ghetto cool.

But some things do indeed go right. Christopher Jackson has a natural appeal as Vertus, who is clearly a good person struggling to do what's right under impossible conditions, whether it's the violence that surrounds him or a friend that has locked him out. Ben Thompson has affable charm as the token white guy (and gets definite points for the most head-spinning transition on Broadway -- he came here straight from playing Miss Trunchbull in *Matilda!*). Pinkins brings authority even to a sliver of a role like Vertus's mother.

And Saul Williams embodies the spirit of the righteously angry, whip-smart and emotionally complex Shakur in the role of John. He delivers his lines with passion, especially on the straightforward rap of the unapologetic "Holler If Ya Hear Me." The presentation of that song, like most, is no masterpiece, with rudimentary staging and choreography and lighting often undercutting the actors on stage even when they have something decent to do.

But it has an undeniable presence and authority. When they're not shying away from hip-hop and performing it the way fans of the music would love to hear, the show provides a glimpse of how rap could power a great musical. Let's just hope we don't have to wait for nostalgia's warm glow to tame its spirit before that happens.

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