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Theater: The Most Absorbent Musical On Broadway; A Wonderful "Life"

12/08/2017 03:51 am ET | Updated Dec 08, 2017

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS: THE BROADWAY MUSICAL ** 1/2 out of ****

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: THE LIVE RADIO PLAY *** out of ****

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS: THE BROADWAY MUSICAL ** 1/2 out of ****

PALACE THEATRE

It's the spongier, most absorbent show on Broadway. It captures the cheerful, good-natured charm of the now-classic TV series. It's a guaranteed good time for families. It features a break-out performance from star Ethan Slater. It contains the best tap-dancing by a squid probably since *The Little Mermaid* if not ever. I'd recommend it to fans of the animated series or anyone looking for family friendly fare. But it could so easily have been much better.

Are you familiar with *SpongeBob SquarePants*? I've been a fan of the show since it began, writing about it for the first time just weeks after it debuted in 1999. He's a goofily enthusiastic dork (proudly so) and happy denizen of Bikini Bottom. Surrounded by his starfish best friend Patrick, his female pal the squirrel Sandy, his cranky neighbor Squidward and a host of others, SpongeBob works at the Krusty Krab, gets into scrapes and almost always sees the bright side of life. Unfailingly optimistic, SpongeBob can be cranky but he snaps out of it in time to save the day...or come close to saving the day, which is almost as good!

SpongeBob The Musical is not a cash-in extension of a valuable property, not in my book. It's inevitable, obvious, and something I've anticipated with nervous glee from the moment they announced the show. Unfortunately, they also announced the score would include a string of songs penned by various pop stars, the same way they compile soundtracks for films like *Footloose*. It seemed like a terrible idea at the time and indeed the songs are the weakest part of the evening. A few good tunes sneak in, but by and large they're enthusiastic yet interchangeable. You could switch the songs around and with a few lyric changes they could appear in the first act or the second, here or there. So you'll hum the clever touches, you'll remember the tap-dancing and the plastic balls and you'll cheer Slater's terrific turn in a truly demanding and tricky role. But you won't hear the great score this sponge deserved.

Anyway, the theater is awash in blue sparkly streamers for that underwater effect, the band plays Hawaiian music before the show begins and the sides of the stage are dominated by fun, Rube Goldberg-like contraptions that fully deliver at key moments. SpongeBob greets the day in his usual happy way and even an earthquake can't shake his sangfroid.

Wait...earthquake??!! Yes, the underwater town of Bikini Bottom is right near a volcano and it's going to blow by sunset the next day. The entire town panics but SpongeBob enlists his pal Patrick and his friend Sandy to save the day! Oh and the evil Plankton hopes to hypnotize the town into preferring his Chum Bucket restaurant over the Krusty Krab. And the daughter of the owner of the Krusty Krab wants to be a singer. And Sandy is menaced by bullies because she's a mammal. And Patrick is embraced by a cult of sardines as a savior. And the town is going to host a benefit concert to raise money so they can pay for an Escape Pod and escape the lava flow in the nick of time. And probably ten other plot points I'm forgetting about. Yes the other big mistake — this time by book writer Kyle Jarrow — was to mistakenly believe every single character needed to have a moment to shine in the spotlight, along with their own complicated storyline. That stretches out a sweet little story to two and a half hours, which does the show no favors.

Happily, it's also the rare musical where act two is much better than act one. The first act spends a lot of laborious time setting up the 17 different storylines. Act two has better songs, more action and eventually a propulsive rush to the confetti-filled finale. You'll be smiling when you leave, even if you struggle to sing any song other than the reprise of the TV show's catchy theme. (More on that later.)

So here's the good news. The cast is game, they have good voices (I think) and director Tina Landau has conceived and directed it with aplomb. While the production is handsome, it also has a playground vibe that feels just right. The winning scenic and costume design is by David Zinn, who made exactly the right choice by keeping it simple with SpongeBob — just a yellow shirt and a red tie and zoom, you've got a hero sponge — and then goes one better with the clever but easy but oh so fun depiction of a squid. *Frozen* will probably look twice as expensive but have a hard time evoking half the fun.

You can see the show at its best when Panic! At The Disco deliver the stand-out song "(Just A) Simple Sponge." Slater delivers it sweetly and Landau offers up some really clever uses for Day-Glo sponges manipulated by a chorus to swirl around our hero. But more typically, you hear the show's most boring song ("Chop To The Top" by Lady Antebellum) followed right by one of the best ("I'm Not A Loser" by They Might Be Giants) for a head-spinning experience. It's hard to fathom (get it?) why they didn't ask They Might Be Giants or the protean writer/producer Andy Paley (who co-wrote the 11 o'clock number "Best Day Ever") to tackle the entire score. More's the pity.

Truly, a lot of songs just kill time: Bowie's "No Control" feels out of place, "Daddy Knows Best" does nothing, Steven Tyler and Joe Perry offer up the generic "Bikini Bottom Boogie" and Yolanda Adams offers up a lay-up of a gospel parody on "Super Sea Star Savior." John Legend has one of the show's best numbers — the sweet duet "(I Guess I) Miss You," so it's easy to imagine how quickly the show's creators were fooled into thinking the bad idea of farming out songs might work. But with so many flat passages and the politics of requesting a song from the likes of Sara Bareilles and the guys from Aerosmith and then trying to say, hey, try again or thanks but no thanks, well you can see what a bind they put themselves in.

But what a shame and what a show they might have had. Still, like *Seussical*, a shortened, tighter version of this show should be a killer for school and community theater productions for a long time to come. They can and should drop most of the subplots (or reduce them to a quick line or two), especially the one with a rock band showing up for the benefit and Pearl hoping to become their back-up singer. Sandy being chased by a mob of mammal haters, the hoary political one-liners, Plankton's extended romance with his computer assistant — all of these could also be referenced briefly or cut entirely. That would leave Patrick's brief split from SpongeBob and Squidward's dreams of performing for the town at the benefit concert because, guess what? Those two subplots and a daring plan to save the town are plenty!

For all these complaints, I had fun, mostly because the cast was so winning. Gavin Lee has a blast as the grumpy Squidward, Wesley Taylor has fun as the scheming Plankton, Danny Skinner is adorable as Patrick and Lilli Cooper has the girl-power spunk you expect of a squirrel from Texas. They all show flashes of vocal power though, in a further complication, the sound design of Walter Trarbach is weirdly quiet when it comes to the volume level. These days, most Broadway shows blare out at you. But the audio here (especially at the beginning but really throughout) is notably subdued. For a while, the audience was restraining itself because we were struggling to hear the dialogue and lyrics. Worse, the pop songs by and large had middle of the road melodies that didn't play to the strengths of the singers. At moments, they all let loose, showing the color and character they could bring to a tune. But between striking a gee-whiz kiddie tone and composers not being in

the room to shape songs further during rehearsals and on the road, the vocal lines for most songs were bland and flat.

It's all anchored by a delightful performance from Ethan Slater, who holds this entire show together in a casually winning manner. He strikes just the right notes for SpongeBob (no easy task) and rises to every challenge, whether it's belting out big numbers, goofing around or using his physical agility to make clambering over and around and through an obstacle course of ladders look dangerous but easy (was he a gymnast in a previous life?), all while generating laughs and sympathy and never boring us for a second.

So many little touches are good, like the way they build at the finale to a big musical number...and then launch into SpongeBob strumming quietly on a uke. And Julie McBride must be the hardest working conductor on Broadway, what with the cast constantly handing off props to her in a playful parade of interruptions. And who can't love a big Broadway musical that can pause to have someone play with little plastic toys to act out a town in chaos, just like kids do in their bedrooms every day.

Then they screw up the obvious, like not having piña colodas or *any* Hawaiian-themed drinks for sale at the bar during intermission. (Big mistake! Mom and dad will have fun but they could be having more.) And I still can't believe they messed around with the lay-up of the show's ultra-catchy theme song. It seems a no-brainer to start or finish (or start *and* finish) the show with its popular theme song. On TV during the title sequence, a pirate pops up and barks out the first line: "Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?" And a chorus of kids shouts out gleefully, "SpongeBob SquarePants!" It's a treat and would get everyone in the mood. And yes, there's the pirate at the beginning of the show, only to be tossed out by security when he tries to use his cell phone. He vows to be back and indeed he returns at the beginning of the second act to sing a generic but lively pirate tune. And he vows to come back when security tosses him out again. Yes of *course* he returns at the finale, obviously to lead a sing-along of the show's theme song with a call and response from the audience. The big finish occurs, confetti is everywhere, the audience is completely keyed up and the stage is plunged into darkness. The moment is perfect to shine a spotlight on the pirate and have him shout out, "Hold on! Hold on!!! I have a question!" and launch into the song as the audience gleefully shouts out "SpongeBob SquarePants!" in response. Instead, after teasing this very moment the entire night, they simply race through a retread of the tune in thirty seconds — almost as if they're embarrassed; I mean you can *barely* recognize it, the song is so sped-up and tossed off — cheating the audience out of their chance to join in and scream his name with joy. It's an opportunity so head-scratchingly obvious I can't imagine how they missed it. Maybe a mischievous and persistent sponge could talk them into tweaking the curtain call? A pirate can dream, can't he?

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: THE LIVE RADIO PLAY *** out of ****

IRISH REPERTORY THEATRE

I refuse to describe the plot of *It's A Wonderful Life*. I mean, dear god, haven't you seen the Frank Capra classic? It's often remembered as a sentimental holiday treat. But of course anyone who actually *watches* the

movie knows it is harrowing and dark and deeply moving, with the sentimental balm at the last moments of the film just barely enough to shake off the gloom. Jimmy Stewart's knife-edge of a performance is one of cinema's best, drawing upon his sobering experience of war to give the trapped, desperate, thwarted dreams of his hero real despair.

Many Hollywood films were also adapted for the radio and this play version by Anthony E. Palermo delightfully builds on that tradition. It's a clever way to present the story from a new angle without having to really compete with the memory of the film. You'd be a fool to remake the movie or even turn it into a straightforward play. But here we get nostalgia, the pleasure of "live" radio and the spine of the film's story all at once. The film airs every holiday but this production (which has been mounted in New York several times before) should be an annual tradition as well.



(© CAROL ROSEGG)

Ian Holcomb, Orlagh Cassidy, Aaron Gaines, and Dewey Caddell in *It's a Wonderful Life: The 1946 Live Radio Play*.

The set-up is low-key and winning. We watch as the cast of actors preparing to perform the play arrive, chat with one another, sing carols and wait for a perennially late member (there's always one) to breeze in right before showtime. They coach us on how to behave (clap when the applause light is on), they prepare the sound effects (corn flakes in a big bowl will sound just like snow on the ground when you tromp on them with shoes) and then they begin the performance. Two breaks include commercials for the sponsors (LSMFT! Lucky Strikes Mean Fine Tobacco!), the actors grab a coffee or water and props allow the studio audience to

keep track of which characters an actor is playing at any one time. (Most double up on roles and I wonder if they used props to help the studio audiences back in the day.)

Anyone who has ever watched a radio play being performed knows what a treat that is, from observing the simple sound effects to the fun of seeing an actor switch from a little child to an old woman in the blink of an eye and so on. Yes, this softens the rough edges of *It's A Wonderful Life* and brings a lot of light into the dark night of the soul that is this particular story, but so what? You can always watch the movie.

Charlotte Moore directs the cast with a light touch and they are uniformly strong. Aaron Gaines has the thankless task of playing George Bailey; the shadow of Stewart and the fact that this version is invariably gentler guarantees he can't scale the heights. But he's good, as is Haley Bond in the role of dutiful wife. Everyone else has a lot more fun diving into numerous parts, from the Vince Vaughn-like (but more handsome) Ian Holcomb to Orlagh Cassidy in about a dozen turns to the puckishly winning Rory Duffy tossing off numerous smaller parts and having the most fun of all by getting to deliver the sound effects.

Yet Dewey Caddell is first among equals, thanks to scoring very strongly as Clarence the Angel *and* the hateful Mr. Potter and several others, all with consummate skill. But this isn't a night for score-keeping. (Too late, says Caddell!) Performed in an intimate space at Irish Rep, you can glimpse the cast preparing (and grabbing a bite) as you snake through the hallway downstairs to your seats, the staff politely whispers good night as you leave to indicate another show is being performed upstairs and you should avoid loud talking until you're outside and it's all such a treat you want to send friends to it and then promise yourself to return next year. If they offered Flaming Mulled Wine (heavy on the cinnamon!), why the night would be perfect.

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 **

Actually **

Harry Clarke ** 1/2

Bedlam's Peter Pan * 1/2

Home For The Holidays *

Describe The Night **

Pride and Prejudice ***

The Parisian Woman *

Once On This Island **

SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical ** 1/2

It's A Wonderful Life: The Live Radio Play ***

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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.