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THE WORLD OF EXTREME HAPPINESS ** 1/2 out of ****

BROADWAY BY THE YEAR: 1915 - 1940 ** 1/2

VERITÉ * 1/2

FABULOUS! *

THE WORLD OF EXTREME HAPPINESS ** 1/2 out of ****

MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB

Don't expect a production of The World Of Extreme Happiness to play Beijing anytime soon. It should because this new drama by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig cares passionately about that country and its many peoples, the varied ethnic groups and indeed countries subsumed into the idea of "China," the peasants drawn to the big cities in hope and fear, the rising middle and upper class, the artistically rich culture and the crushing forces that have battered them all about. It's an ambitious, lumpy, fitfully successful but very well-acted and fascinating work.

Sunny (an excellent Jennifer Lim) is unwanted and unloved. She's a girl in a country where only boys have value and her father tosses the new-born Sunny into a bucket of pig slop. But Sunny keeps drawing breath and raising a racket and her mother can't bear to finish the child off so Sunny is rescued. The family will pay a price under China's one-child policy but an even worse price is paid when that mother dies giving birth -- finally -- to a boy Pete (Telly Leung).

Sunny grows up and heads to the city to work in one of those anonymous factories, the sort where peasants from the countryside commit suicide in despair after slaving away for years on end. Sunny dutifully sends money home, desperate to ensure a better future for her little brother. But still her dour father looks down on Sunny and does what he can to frustrate Pete's dreams of a better life.

That doesn't stop Sunny, who befriends a co-worker, takes a motivational class on her evenings off and plots and schemes for the ultimate goal: the chance to speak at the company's big media event in the Great Hall of the People and thus secure an office job off the factory floor.

The Playbill handed out before the show included an insert that judiciously offers a rundown of various hot-button issues in China: that one child policy, the coal mines where Sunny's father toils, the mania for self-help guides and gurus as well as a primer on the Monkey King, a folk hero that holds primacy in China and a character which Pete longs to perform in tea houses. (That's how modest their goals can be.)

But it's not necessary since the play itself tackles all these elements with aplomb, along with references to the disastrous Great Leap Forward and a lot more. Cowhig's work is a little less sure-footed in the drama department: the many varied characters are vivid and real and specific, but the numerous plot strands are never tied together in a satisfying way, making the twists and turns feel like melodrama. Further, some switches feel too abrupt, such as Sunny's rather cruel treatment of her father (James Saito) at one point. To us he just seems trapped in a backwards mind-set, albeit viciously so. Her gratuitous meanness seems mean of her rather than just desserts.

Luckily, the broad melodrama holds our attention and the cast is excellent. Much of the cast doubles and triples roles so effectively you may not even realize it. I'll single out their best work, with Saito very good as that bitter father (his businessman is less developed as written). Joe Mei is good as her mother and factory friend, though that friend seemed oddly more Japanese in clothing and hair and such to the eyes of this gweilo. Francis Jue was fine as a cynical superintendent but excellent in the show's best scene as Mr. Destiny, a self-help guru. Sue Jin Song is good as an ambitious pr executive, though her storyline feels the thinnest and least convincing.

For me, one-time Warbler Telly Leung was excellent in dual roles, mainly Pete. I'd gladly watch him perform stories of the Monkey King; indeed, his charisma lifted the show whenever he was onstage. But the one center stage almost the entire night was Jennifer Lim, who traveled a great deal emotionally as Sunny. She carried this world on her shoulders and made it look easy.

Director Eric Ting navigated the many and varied scenes ably enough, eliciting solid tech work from all the behind the scenes talent. Still, the play needed more focus and shaping by Ting and a dramaturge to unite its disparate elements. The dramatic finale with Sunny and Pete was an effective one. But it was an earlier scene that stayed with me most: it's a scene where Sunny is opening up to Mr. Destiny in front of an audience paying to hear his canned words of wisdom. Spoofing media-genic self-help gurus is a cliché of course. Unexpectedly, thanks to Lim and Jue and the writing, Verité turned a moment of easy laughs into a surprisingly emotional one without ever over-selling the action. It's a sign that when Cowhig consistently focuses her hunger for big subjects into genuine, character-driven scenes that the results will be far more than just "promising."

BROADWAY BY THE YEAR: 1915 - 1940 ** 1/2

TOWN HALL

Broadway By The Year is a fixture of the theater scene, a chance for big Broadway talent and cabaret stars to join up-and-comers in an evening devoted to the Great American Songbook. The hook is that each evening is devoted to 25 years of Broadway. Created and hosted by impresario Scott Siegel, it's a chance to sense a bit of the Great White Way's changing styles as well as feast on some serious talent.

Of course, like any such endeavor, evenings featuring all sorts of singers is invariably a grab bag. This particular gathering was undeniably on the lesser side, given the high bar set by BBTY in the past. Some performers were out of voice, others off their game and so on. Yet even on an off night, the show passed pleasantly and numerous pleasures were to be had.

Danny Gardner was the star of this show: he goofed through Irving Berlin's "Oh How I Hate To get Up In The Morning" (from 1918) alongside the chipper BBTY chorus, danced a hastily improvised number to "Pack Up Your Sins and Go To The Devil" that looked smooth as silk and paired nicely with his love Aleka Emerson on "The Varsity Drag." Oakley Boycott (what a name!) goofed her way through "You'd Be Surprised," delivering up a new singing style with almost every line. The relatively lightweight material in the teens and early '20s suited performers like Boycott who knew to have fun with it. (The women, by the way, really stepped it up this evening in the outfit department; many of them looked smashing.)

Lumiro Tubo certainly looked lovely but her singing style is not suited to the getting-down or jazz possibilities of "St. Louis Blues." The great Tonya Pinkins showed her how it's done with "The Thrill Is Gone." Hell, actress that she is, Pinkins had me in her grasp even during the musical bridge simply by the force of her presence.

Chuck Cooper charmed his way through "It Ai't Necessarily So," even though the song was burdened with a laboriously complex arrangement. And John Bolton -- like others who shined best on this night -- had the right daffy air when singing "It's De-Lovely." In contrast, the BBTY chorus (a group of up-and-comers Siegel has showcased/"discovered" in other productions) navigated an almost-too-complex arrangement on "Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag" and pretty much pulled it off. They did even better with a straightforward delivery of "It's A Lovely Day Tomorrow."

Quieter highlights included Steve Ross gliding through "Say It With Music" and Maxine Linehan's focus on the lyrics of "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes," which brought that chestnut back to life for me. In the same way, the great Karen Akers was sterling on "Where Or When." It's no surprise when Akers delivers on a standard, of course. But I was [thoroughly charmed by Josh Young](#), sounding very old school traditional in a good way on "All The Things You Are." I knew him only from the rock vocalizing of his Tony-nominated turn as Judas in Jesus Christ Superstar (in which he was great). So I'd no idea if he could switch on a dime to classic balladeering and indeed he could. Young also looked smashing in his dapper, classy suit, making the [upcoming musical Amazing Grace](#) all the more worth anticipating. That's Broadway By The Year at its best: showcasing legends with a chance to shine on great material while giving new talent the opportunity to display their versatility.

Finally, an invariable highlight is when singers forego microphones and sing unamplified. John Easterlin offered up "Someday" in the style of the day (specifically 1925), and milked every bit of applause like the seasoned pro he is. Then [William Michals](#) came out and slayed 'em with "One Alone." His gorgeous voice never needs speakers to reach the back of the audience but it's his effortless delivery of the lyrics as if new-minted that makes Michals such a treat. (Sinatra similarly makes the emotions of each song transparent.) Later, Tony winner Emily Skinner did a fine "No, You Can't Have My Heart" and then duetted with Michals on "It Never Was You." In truth, their voices just didn't blend well (who can predict vocal chemistry?) but any chance to hear Michals again is a delight. I'm still kicking myself for missing him in South Pacific and look forward to see him in full sometime soon. If you have the chance to see him in concert or in a musical, jump.

I'm already looking forward to [the next edition on March 30; it covers Broadway's golden age from 1941-1965](#). Sure, this was an off night, but if you can list six or seven memorable performances, enjoy the return of old friends and savor dashing new talent like Young, how off can it be?

VERITÉ * 1/2

LCT3

The set for Verité (designed by Andrew Boyce) is serviceable but surprisingly plodding. It depends a lot on window blinds and every time the setting changes from say an apartment to a grocery store or an office into a hotel room, we watch as sets of blinds sloooowly raise or lower one at a time (never all at once, god knows why) and then maybe a grocery store shelf timidly slides out and then a sofa pulls back out of sight and so on. It's like a magic trick slowed down so you can observe how it's done. More to the point, it mirrors the oddly tepid plot of this dark comedy which takes forever to get going and then goes precisely nowhere. Nowhere until the last moment, that is, a moment that should have taken place ten minutes into the play rather than at the end.

The hook is certainly vivid and worthy of Nick Jones, one of the central writers and a co-producer on Orange Is The New Black. A struggling writer named Jo (the winning Anna Camp) has been laboring over a fantasy novel for many years, trying the patience of her prickly husband (Danny Wolohan, always good) and encouraged by her son (Oliver Hollmann).

No one else has given Jo's labor of love the time of day until a boutique publishing house calls her in for a meeting. They love her "voice" but don't care for the fantasy novel. So they'll pay her \$50,000 to write a memoir. A memoir, Jo wonders? But her life is so uninteresting. Well, what if they made it interesting? So that's the vaguely out-there idea or perhaps the suggestion of an idea in this show: publishers searching for the next big memoir start playing god with an unknown writer's life, throwing dramatic conflicts at her in an attempt to give her something to write about. One can easily imagine the possibilities: death, mayhem, robberies, hostages, disease, terrorists and so on. The sky's the limit!

What actually happens in the play is very, very little. It takes ages for the (possible) premise to be set up -- some of the tension is supposed to derive from wondering if our heroine is just paranoid and merely imagines the publishers are toying with her life for evil if lucrative purposes. Jo takes forever to decide whether to accept the

deal, then agonizes over spending a week-long vacation at the beach, which certainly doesn't sound dramatically promising. Finally, when an apparent friend from high school pops into view (Ebon Moss-Bachrach as Winston), she decides a-ha! An affair! The play is well into its second half before even this very modest dip into "drama" for our would-be memoirist surfaces. Half the time Jo plays it coy as to what is going on, while Jones stretches out the non-existent suspense over whether the publishers are genuinely interfering with her life or Jo is just nuts. (All I could think was, they better be or she doesn't even have the makings of a magazine article, much less a memoir.)

Finally, finally (!) Jo throws caution to the wind (sort of) and heads to Latin America with Winston. She fantasizes he's a drug lord though all he really seems to be doing is repairing refrigeration units in grocery stores and yet perhaps is at the same time an actor working for the publishers. Are you bored yet? Because the idea of publishers engineering an affair with a guy pretending to install refrigeration units is as nutty as the show gets until the actor goes off script in an unearned melodramatic twist.

The rug is sort of pulled out from under us as we go back and forth about what exactly is going on, right up to the end, which leaves little doubt. But long before we get there, we've given up caring.

Camp is appealing on stage, but no one could make such a bland, timid character come to full life. Moss-Bachrach is solid as the lover but he too can't make sense of such a muddled premise. Wolohan is of course rock solid as her husband but in the play's typical inability to commit or make things interestingly vague, he mutters nasty comments at her that seem utterly out of character. We never suss out whether this is her paranoid imagination or suppressed rage on his part. Jeanine Serralles has the thankless role of his sister, forced to wear jokey outfits and absurd spray-painted sneakers (all by Paloma Young) so we know she's a brassy gal with trashy taste but certain to be loud and speak the truth. On the bright side, Hollmann has the best line of the show and is adorable even during the curtain call.

Matt McGrath and and Robert Sella are actually quite amusing as the Nordic publishers, but they seem to be acting in an alternate universe, with performances more akin to a Saturday Night Live sketch than the rest of the cast. Director Moritz Von Stuelpnagel doesn't begin to mould all these ideas and acting styles into a coherent whole.

Without question, the kernel of an idea is here and Jones should have committed to it. If Jo had been offered this deal with the devil and seen it kick into high gear in the first ten minutes, perhaps a consistent tone and witty satire about our thirst for reality -- however manufactured -- could have been created. Unfortunately, it takes the entire length of the play just to get to where the story should have begun.

FABULOUS! *

TIMES SQUARE ARTS CENTER

I was both mildly dismayed and mildly inspired by Fabulous!, a silly gay romp of a musical with cross-dressing guys on the lam, sailors who are twinkie and twinkly, closeted movie stars, gangsters and enough romantic possibilities to fill a cruise ship. It was exactly the sort of nonsense I was in the mood for.

Since the show had enjoyed a limited run and come back for an open-ended one, savvy theater-goers might rightly assume it would at least be a cut above the average. You keep expectations low Off Off Broadway but hey, you never know.

Sadly, the material at hand is simply deadly, with book and lyrics by Dan Derby and music by Michael Rheault all quite unmemorable. It's the sort of show you might see at a fringe festival and then forget five minutes after it was over. With technical elements under a very modest budget, I'd single out the costumes of Maya Graffagna as doing the most with the least. The sets and so on might have been charmingly low-rent if the story had held our attention. It didn't and was, to say the least, uninspiring.

And yet, despite not being remotely ready to recommend the show, I did find the give-it-their-best attitude of the cast rather inspiring. God knows it's hard enough to make it in the theater. Actors dream of great material but must hungrily latch onto any actual role in an actual paying gig with glee. No, it may not be great but what are you gonna do?

The sailors are quite well cast as silly chorus boys (I chose Joel Libed as Sailor #3, as one will when the mind drifts) and like everyone on stage, they gave it their all. Rising above the script as best they could, Rebecca Kopec as the token closeted lesbian Sylvia and Michael James Valvo as her droll gay sidekick simply delivered these stock roles -- cliches and all -- as unapologetically as they could.

The show is retro to its core, but in a typical sign of flagging creativity, they made Sylvia an ugly, rejected figure at the end with lipstick smeared across her face after being rejected by the character she loves. At the show's nadir, she kisses him and he almost throws up after their smooch. It's an ugly caricature from a bygone era, the sort of nasty stereotype best left in the past and one Derby should have risen above. To her credit, Kopec tackles it with gusto.

Kelsey Youmans and Alexander Price goof about with abandon in their gangster roles, though Steven Bidwell can't really bring anything to the mild part of the lovelorn captain. Jonathan Grunert in contrast actually brings vim to his Rock Hudson knock-off, thanks to square-jawed good looks and a knowing ability to play it straight, the only way to make such a role work. I'd actually seek him out in other parts, as I would the two leads.

Tobias Young as Laura Lee sings very well and delivers his flat comic lines with enough gusto to even make some of them land. He's appealing, as is DaWoyne A. Hill as Laura Lee's partner in crime Jane Mann. The role makes no sense but by God Hill sings his big number with such determination to put it over you'd swear for a second he was singing "I Am What I Am" from La Cage Aux Folles. Far from it, but his commitment almost makes you forget that.

Why be so hard on a silly show with a silly plot and no desire to do anything but make you giggle? Because I love silly shows just as much as the next guy and know how precious they are when done well. Just because they look easy is no reason to go easy on those who fall far short. God knows the cast deserved something a lot more fabulous than Fabulous!

THEATER OF 2015

[Honeymoon In Vegas](#) **

[The Woodsman](#) ***

[Constellations](#) ** 1/2

[Taylor Mac's A 24 Decade History Of Popular Music 1930s-1950s](#) ** 1/2

[Let The Right One In](#) **

Da no rating

[A Month In The Country](#) ** 1/2

[Parade](#) in Concert at Lincoln Center ** 1/2

[Hamilton](#) at the Public ***

The World Of Extreme Happiness ** 1/2

Broadway By The Year 1915-1940 **

Verite * 1/2

Fabulous *

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