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## Theater: There's Nothing at the *End of the Rainbow* for Judy

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**END OF THE RAINBOW**\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**BELASCO THEATRE**

This look at the legendary Judy Garland during her final comeback tour in London is made with all the affection and love in the world. That doesn't prevent it from being the worst sort of bio-musical with cliched dialogue, tiresome drama, meaningless set-ups for classic songs and one of the ugliest and laziest sets on a Broadway stage. Not even Garland herself could have shaken this

out of its stupor, though she might have had the good sense to forego the story and just start belting out one number after another. It's a pity star Tracie Bennett doesn't do the same.

That was the initial fear over this London import. The Brits pioneered the bio-musical with a dash of story serving as an excuse for an extended concert; ultimately they just do away with story altogether and simply perform the hits (a la *Buddy*). Would *End Of The Rainbow* be that sort of lazy revue? No, it's a proper show, more's the pity.

Garland flounces into her London hotel suite, a lavish room complete with rehearsal piano. She's engaged to her manager Mickey (Tom Pelphrey) and momentarily off the drugs and booze to prepare for a five week comeback concert at The Talk Of The Town venue.

Along for the ride is Anthony (Michael Cumpsty), a gay Scottish pianist who doesn't drink and can't abide cursing and yet somehow is an old dear friend of Garland's, despite their fall-out during a disastrous tour some five years ago. Anthony is the adoring gay fan stand-in, reminding Garland of a marriage she forgot (they do pile up), telling her she's beautiful, reminding her of all her great performances and even in a moment of vulnerability indulging in the fantasy of whisking Garland away to safety where he can rescue her from her fate. (The same sort of fantasies swirl around Elvis and Michael Jackson.)

Anthony and Mickey dislike each other intensely, though it's hard to see why. For much of the show, they're both focused on the same goal: keeping Garland off her addictions so she can be healthy and perform at her best. Mickey insists gay fans love Garland to be miserable. "If she were in the gutter half-

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dead, you'd come in your pants!" he barks at the mousy Anthony at one point. Ultimately, Anthony proves the villain of the piece. Like every other major figure in Garland's life, he's so desperate to have her perform that Mickey gives in and shoves more pills down her throat.

But it takes a long time to get there. The banal script by Peter Quilter barely qualifies as fan fiction, with lazy "insider" references (Judy mentions going to school on the MGM lot with Deanna Durbin and Elizabeth Taylor) and zingers like her moaning that every time she drinks a glass of water she feels like she's missing out on something. That's actually one of the show's best lines. More typical is Judy's discussion of drugs: of course she skipped down the Yellow Brick Road; Garland was so high "I could have flownnnnnnnn down it" she says.

But so what if the plot is the usual warmed-over rehash of Garland's life? At least we get to hear those songs performed in the Garland style, right? Barely. For much of the lengthy 80 minute first act, songs are performed only in snippets or out of context. We get a brief rehearsal early on, with Judy and Anthony working on the tempo for a number. You get a teeny tiny glimpse of what might have been: a chance to imagine an artist at work, serious work as she crafts a show and finds new life and insight in songs she has sung many times before. But we have to wait most of the first act before even a single number is performed in its entirety, something that rarely happens after that.

The real show stopper is the set "transformation" from the hotel room to the nightclub (the set and costumes are the responsibility of William Dudley). Most every scene (except for a brief, pointless BBC radio interview) takes place in the hotel suite or onstage at the venue. To make the transition, the center panel of the room flies up and a band is revealed to back Garland up. Bizarrely, the entire rest of the hotel suite stays right in place. They don't even bother to move the couch or chairs or luggage most of the time. It all just sits there on stage, huge chunks of set and furniture cluttering up our vision while we're supposed to imagine Garland in that famed cabaret. One doesn't need elaborate sets or massive trickery in the theater. But whatever constraints are at play here -- are the wings too shallow? -- one struggles to understand why the furniture wasn't at least wheeled out of sight. The audience can be asked to use its imagination but the set designer at the very least should do the same.

Still, none of this would matter if you heard huge chunks of classic songs performed with even one-tenth of Garland's artistry. You don't because so few of the tunes (maybe four or five?) are delivered in their entirety. One of the most puzzling occurs at the end of the first act. Until then, every song is performed in a natural context; that is, Garland is rehearsing a number or singing out a line or two as a joke or performing on stage. But suddenly at the finale this pattern is dropped. The band is "revealed" but a scrim of sorts is left in place so we know we're not at the nightclub. For the first and only time in the show, we are seeing Garland perform in some shadow nether region, her most personal and private place. She's belting out "The Man That Got Away," one of her greatest numbers. The problem is that there's no emotional reason for her to be singing this song at this moment. Judy isn't remembering the real love of her life (whether that would be a man or her fans or whomever) and she's certainly not thinking about her fiancé. He has left the hotel simply to buy her cigarettes. Why this would trigger a number of transcendent pain and regret is unfathomable. And yet there she is, for the first and only time in the show, singing a number for herself. We have no idea why.

Act Two is no better with Mickey becoming more cynical with each passing moment. When seeing a new work, I always assume the blame for a bad show lies with the behind the scenes people; when even the marvelously talented Michael Cumpsty can't create an interesting character, you've every reason to assume the other actors are equally ham-strung. Pelphrey and Bennett have no chemistry to speak of; they bark and curse at each other but it feels less like a roller coaster and more like pro forma battling.

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It's just as hard to understand why Judy is attracted to her pianist. We don't get to see them collaborate as artists to create her concert. When they're finally onstage and Anthony should be there to support and work with her, he proves incompetent or indifferent. Garland switches up the set list and calls for "Blue Skies," a song they haven't rehearsed. Anthony flatly refuses, insisting she do the next song on their set list ("Dancing In The Dark"), a rather bizarre moment of intransigence. Finally, he reluctantly gets the band to wing it. Obviously they don't have charts for this song but any musicians worth their salt should be able to accommodate such a simple request. By then of course, Garland is singing "Dancing In The Dark" and the concert collapses in disarray.

At the center of all this bathos is Bennett, doing her best Garland imitation. Watch Judy Davis in the TV film *Life With Judy Garland: Me And My Shadows* to see an actress creating a character. Here, with this script and this production, Bennett doesn't have a chance. She cocks her hips, spreads her arms and embraces every tic of Garland she can rustle up. Her voice has a mile-wide vibrato here, but Bennett almost never gets to use it properly. I look forward to seeing her in some other, better show. I'd even like to see her in concert where she could be free to sing as herself. I've no idea what she's capable of but I imagine this award-winning veteran of the London stage can do better than the desperate mimicry on display here.

In a final act of sheer unimaginative self-parody, the show ends by having Anthony simply step to the front of the stage and recite the details of Garland's death. She marries the now-villainous (to us) Mickey and then dies of an overdose a few months after that. Frank Sinatra paid for her funeral and James Mason gave the eulogy. Anthony intones, going on to list the celebrities in attendance like any true gossip. And *20,000* people filed by to view her body lying in state, he exclaims. Uh, did we doubt her fame? Is that supposed to be some sort of revelation? And her death *made headlines around the world*, he might have shouted. Yes, we knew that. But Anthony isn't done. Standing in the back of the funeral home, he tells us, were a clutch of pianists who had backed Garland over the years. "I was just one of them," he says with false modesty. One wonders if any of the others could play "Blue Skies" on the fly.

You should screen one of Garland's classic films or listen to her *Carnegie Hall* album or watch some of the episodes of her legendary TV show. Any one of them would give you far more insight and appreciation for the artistry of one of entertainment's legendary performers than this show. All *End Of The Rainbow* will do is make you dislike some of her more ardent, clueless fans.

Here's a look at Garland at her peak.

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## Theater: Gore Vidal's 'The Best Man' -- A Second, Better Look

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**Gore Vidal's *The Best Man* \*\*\* out of \*\*\* Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre**

It's common courtesy not to speak ill of the dead. Happily, a return to Gore Vidal's sturdy old political drama *The Best Man* stirs no nasty impulse. With a clutch of new cast members who are the equal or even

better than their predecessors and James Earl Jones in fighting trim, it's an amiable night of the theater that has moved up a notch in my estimation. ([Here's a link to my original review on April 2.](#))

This show, which opened on Broadway in March of 1960 and was set at the presidential convention in Philly that same year, shows two candidates going at each other to gain advantage in a deadlocked vote where neither one has enough support to gain their party's nomination. John Larroquette, that increasingly valuable stage actor, is the intellectual Easterner. John Stamos is the wily, good-looking, more conservative plain talker who has dug up dirt on Larroquette's nervous breakdown and wants to smear him out of the race. Stamos's role was originally played by Eric McCormack, who handled the wily subterfuge and gay subtext better. However, Stamos's take provides a clearer contrast to the classic-quoting Larroquette and brings a slight George W. Bush aura, which sets off their showdown nicely.

Cybill Shepherd has stepped in for Candice Bergen as Larroquette's estranged wife back in the saddle for the sake of the campaign. Neither women was wholly comfortable on stage though that would surely come with time. Where Bergin played the wife as thoroughly uncomfortable at every moment, Shepherd uses her cool reserve to show a woman who has made her decision and will live with it; she may not like the situation but she's up to the task. Kristin Davis has a hoot as the wife of Stamos. But the biggest contrast is Elizabeth Ashley who steps in for the great but fragile Angela Lansbury. Lansbury was shaky physically and that gave her role a grand old dame vibe, whereas Ashley gets more mileage out of the Southern belle, a flighty woman who has a steely reserve and serious points to make amidst her fluttering.

All in all, the cast changes are fun and have reinvigorated and re-imagined (modestly) a light entertainment, the sort of show Broadway turned out with ease once upon. Vidal's play deals with timeless issues of race and politics and morality and what it takes to win and whether you can sell your soul for victory and still do good. But mostly it just wants to have fun.

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Among the veterans still with the show, two are especially notable. Jefferson Mays gave a much subtler performance this time around. His fumbling, stumbling turn as an old military buddy of Stamos with some dirt of his own seemed goofier the first time I caught it. This time Mays had settled in to a more wily, nuanced turn. But best of all was Jones. On the critic's night I saw him before the opening in April, he stumbled on some lines and seemed nearly as fragile in his burly way as Lansbury. But now he's a lion in winter, fully in charge and roaring with glee in his chewy role as an ailing president who rightly sees flaws in both candidates and can't for the life of him decide which one to support but mostly enjoys the final burst of attention and power his endorsement holds.

Jones is in fine fettle, making the most of the juicy, broadly outlined President Hockstader. You might want to dip into Vidal's large body of work and start reading some of his historical novels, probably the art of his that will endure the longest. But if you're in New York and have a chance to see *The Best Man*, you'll receive the double pleasure of nodding goodbye to the late Vidal while savoring one of acting's legends in excellent form.

Here's Gore Vidal late in his life, as waspish and politically charged as ever.

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*Central Avenue Breakdown* (NYMF) \*\*\*

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*Swing State* (NYMF) \* 1/2

*Stand Tall: A Rock Musical* (NYMF) \* 1/2

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