

Theater: *Timing Is Right* For David Ives; *Isaac's Eye* Is Piercing

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ALL IN THE TIMING *** out of ****

ISAAC'S EYE *** out of ****

ALL IN THE TIMING *** out of ****

PRIMARY STAGES

I missed *All In The Timing* when it premiered 20 years ago (at Primary Stages, appropriately). The David Ives evening of one acts was one of those shows you kick yourself for not catching. It ran and ran, so you had no excuse. And Ives has gone on to a very interesting, sometimes brilliant career that completely justified the hype. But of course nothing burnishes a show's reputation quite like never seeing it.

Happily, here we are 20 years later and the one acts that were just amusing titles -- "Variations on the Death of Trotsky" and "Philip Glass Buys a Loaf of Bread," for example -- finally come to life and are essentially worth the wait. Some pieces feel like the performances are better than the work; most feel like the one acts could be delivered even more tightly and smartly. But it's a genial night of entertainment with Ives and his wit on full display thanks to a game cast.

The showstopper is unquestionably "Philip Glass Buys a Loaf of Bread," an inspired bit of nonsense that ably spoofs Glass and Robert Wilson yet works perfectly well even for those unfamiliar with their work. All the tech elements are at their peak here, from the set design of Beowulf Boritt (a nicely skewed perspective with four doors that here is augmented by a spare, uber-bakery) to the lighting of Jason Lyons (always deft at setting mood and tempo, an under-appreciated element in skits like these) to the costumes of Anita Yavich (having fun here) and the hair and wigs of Tom Watson (who adorns Carson Elrod with the perfect Glassian mop of hair).

I personally appreciated the cleverness of "Sure Thing," which shows two people meeting cute -- every time one of them stumbles into something inappropriate, a buzzer chimes and they get a do-over until everything turns out right. But whether it's the silliness of "The Philadelphia" or the nutty conceit of "Words Words Words" (in which monkeys are locked in a room with the hope that they'll eventually write *Hamlet*), Ives is consistently working on a level of lowbrow collegiate humor a la Monty Python, which is high praise in my book.

The cast is strong throughout but Jenn Harris scores repeatedly, such as the surly waitress in "The Philadelphia" and Carson Elrod shines throughout and is missed when he doesn't appear in the final sketch.

They are the heart of the richest one act, "The Universal Language." In it, Harris is Dawn, a lonely woman with a stutter who has stumbled into a continuing education course that promises to teach people an Esperanto-like universal language. Her teacher Don (Elrod) dives right into absurd gibberish that she proves adept at understanding and she (and we) soon glom onto every goofy, made-up phrase with glee. It's not a criticism of the other pieces to say they don't have the depth and heart of this one. Dawn probably has nowhere else to go and is delighted to discover she doesn't stutter in this new language. Don is a

would-be con artist who can't bring himself to dupe this sweet person he's falling for. Elrod and Harris easily capture the pathos and emotion while never missing a laugh on the silliness pouring out of their mouths.

Ives might have stuck with just sketch comedy. But this piece pointed the way forward to a career that has blossomed recently with his marvelous adaptation of Moliere called *The School for Lies*, the Tony-winning *Venus in Fur* and the brilliant play of ideas, *New Jerusalem*, a work that ranks with Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* as one of the smartest and most satisfying dramas in recent years. Director John Rando might have tightened things up and focused this or that moment even more in *All In The Timing*. But it was still a pleasure to see where it all began.

ISAAC'S EYE * out of ******
ENSEMBLE STUDIO THEATRE

If you don't think a debate about whether light behaves like a particle or a wave can make for good theater, then you've never seen gripping, brilliant plays of ideas like Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* or David Ives' *New Jerusalem*, works which take the world of ideas (be they scientific or religious) and make them come alive.

So the promising playwright Lucas Hnath certainly didn't stumble when he decided to turn the historical fact of Isaac Newton sticking a needle into his eye -- in order to, perhaps, test one of his theories -- into a play. Hnath only stumbles when he veers away from this debate and settles for plot machinations of a more pedestrian nature.

That doesn't happen until act two. In this first act, the audience is thoroughly engaged by the drama of a young, unknown Isaac Newton pleading his case with Robert Hooke to gain admittance into the Royal Society. It turns out that obscure, young Newton has alighted on similar topics as the brilliant and famous Hooke and is offering up remarkable insights. Hooke is none too pleased but can't help sparring with Newton over his ideas even as Hooke tries to put the lad off so the Great Man can publish his own results first.



Hnath is so good in this first act I was certain I was watching one of the best plays of the year, even though it's only February. The four-person cast and director Lindsay Firman were perfectly in sync with his skill, which is exactly what happens when good actors combine with good writing.

Hnath immediately sets a playful but intellectual tone with an engaging narrator (the excellent Jeff Biehl, who also doubles as a man dying of leprosy). The narrator tells the audience about Newton and his erroneous belief in ether as a disarming way of saying this show may have some facts wrong but it's all in service of a higher truth. And just to keep things clear, when the show does offer some facts up that are, in fact, facts, why he'll write them on the chalkboard so we'll know they're so. Details like the fact that Newton once threatened to burn his parents' house down. Or the fact that Newton did indeed once stick a needle in his eye, though no one is quite sure why.

And we're off, meeting Newton and -- this is actually quite difficult to do -- being immediately convinced of his genius. As written and performed so well by Haskell King, Newton is what we today would blithely describe as a little Asperger-ish. He's utterly focused on his work and not quite able to relate socially to others. His only friend is the appealing and emotionally savvy Catherine (captured to a "t" by Kristen Bush). She seems a perfect helpmate to Newton and he's happy to have her come along when he moves to London to pursue his work, which has to happen after he gets into the Royal Society, which has to happen because Robert Hooke has to recognize his genius, which has to happen because he is a genius and knows it and needs to do his work! Catherine on the other hand, clearly loves Isaac but needs to determine once and for all if she's useful to him like a stool, comforting to him like a pet or actually important to him like a love.

Whether Newton can feel that love and -- even if he can feel that love -- whether he can express it, is the heart of the drama in this first act. It's a crisis precipitated by the arrival of Hooke (Michael Louis Serafin-Wells, good like everyone else), a noted lothario who suddenly senses a soul mate in the perceptive Catherine. He might -- to his shock -- have found a reason for settling down. All this drama is interwoven beautifully with Newton and Hooke debating light and color and what we now know as the scientific method. It's funny, moving and quite thrilling.

Act two is not a crushing disappointment; let's not go that far. But the play moves away from the scientific debate at its heart and devolves into blackmail and subterfuge, all to far less interesting effect. Though the show has been marvelously concentrated on science and a distant era captured with theatrical flair, it sacrifices all that with a surreal touch where Newton has a needle stuck in his eye for a month, a deflating bit of pointlessness that undercuts the reality Hnath created with such ease.

Fine moments can still be found, such as Biehl pleading for his humanity while Newton and Hooke poke and probe at the dying man or Bush navigating the emotions of two men driven by the need to explore ideas. That need is so overwhelming it's either completely selfish or completely selfless. But it's pretty certain that such distinctions won't matter to the woman being ignored.

I can still strongly recommend *Isaac's Eye* for an excellent ensemble molded beautifully by their director. And clearly Hnath is a talent to watch, one good enough to make the exceptional promise of the first act shine much brighter than the modest let-down of the second.

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 ***

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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