

THE BLOG

Theater: Under The Radar, Fiddling With 'Fiddler'

□ 01/11/2016 01:56 pm ET | Updated Jan 20, 2016

 Michael Giltz □

Freelance writer

[EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR](#) *** out of ****

[GERMINAL](#) *** 1/2 out of ****

[FIDDLER ON THE ROOF](#) ** 1/2

UNDER THE RADAR AT THE PUBLIC THEATER 2016:

[EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR](#) *** out of ****

[GERMINAL](#) *** 1/2 out of ****

PUBLIC THEATER

Why, you may wonder, does New York City become flooded with festivals devoted to cutting edge theater in the dead of winter? Thank APAP -- the Association of Performing Arts Presenters. [They meet in January each year](#) and since people looking to book shows are in New York, what better time to mount your production here and let them see it in action? Hence the numerous festivals that have sprung up over the past decade.

The most venerable is [Under The Radar](#), an umbrella for bold and unconventional works curated and overseen by the Public Theater. It runs through January 17 so don't hesitate to snap up any tickets you can: in most cases, the shows will move on though the artists involved are often ones you'll be hearing from in years to come. Both shows I've seen so far were satisfying and classic examples of UTR at its best: the latest effort from the Obie winning company 600 Highwaymen and my first exposure to a French duo named Defoort and Goerger I can't wait to see again.

First, the 600 Highwaymen return to UTR with *Employee Of The Year*. The story it tells is, perhaps, unremarkable if sad. A little girl is the sole

survivor of a tragic house fire, only to learn that her parents weren't "really" her parents, sending her off on a lifelong search for her birth mother. What makes this story compelling is the way it's told. The cast is composed of five young girls in what they adroitly call "a play with children for adults." Each girl narrates in turn the story of J, this orphaned child who remains troubled by the abandonment she feels.

It begins with J even before the fire and ends with J as a very old woman. The girls take center stage one at a time, often incorporating odd gestures and totemic poses while speaking as J and telling of the seemingly fruitless search to track down her mom. It becomes sadder and sadder as J can't let go, first running away as a kid and then dragooning her own children into the endless search when she's an adult. Once in a while, they break into song, plaintive a cappella numbers that add to the undercurrent of loneliness that exists throughout.

(This clip is from an earlier mounting.)

Written and directed by Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone (with songs by David Cale), *Employee Of The Year* works. Why it works, I'm not quite sure. Perhaps the casting of barely teenage girls emphasizes the child in us all, especially when we have unresolved issues with our parents? Maybe it allows us to be more open, more forgiving to a character that might have seemed more tiresomely relentless if played by an adult. (Let it go, we might have felt if J were played by a 30 year old woman.) But those are just guesses. All I know is that it *does* work, from the conceit of a group of kids trading off this part to the moment when one actress breaks character and sings as the person she is, wondering if she'll remember being in this show when she's 60 years old right down to the oddly sweet ending where they run around stage

giggling and laughing like the kids they are.

Where *Employee Of The Year* leaves you pleasingly puzzled (what was that? you might say to yourself afterwards), *Germinal* leaves you just plain pleased. UTR has been trying to mount this delight for years and no wonder: it's a bold, clever, crowd-pleaser of a show that is already certain to be among my favorites of 2016. That's a good way to start off the first week in January.

The video below is a glimpse of an earlier production and slightly misleading, since the show changes a bit depending on what country it's mounted in and the language of the audience. Watch it and you'll still have no idea of what *Germinal* is and to explain it is to remove some of the pleasure of walking into a theater and having no idea what you're going to see. But thanks to a rave in the New York Times, chances are you won't be seeing it since the show was an immediate sell-out. The Public tried to squeeze in more added performances but no such luck. In a better world, this would be a long-running hit Off Broadway just like *Stomp* and *Avenue Q* and it's almost cruel to share details of what will soon be gone.

But here goes! The theater begins in darkness. We see four people slumped on stage, fiddling with switches that seem to be controlling the lights of the theater. They begin to "talk" but their silent thoughts appear as text on the back wall. More fiddling with more controls, the discovery of a microphone and piece by piece they build a world, "discovering" sound, language (sometimes they're speaking in French, other times English or deliriously at one point Japanese), translation, cooperation and more.

Somehow they seem to be creating an entire universe, albeit a nutty

one where everything they can identify (curtains, rubble, the floor and so on) becomes classified as either "pok pok" (the sound they make when the microphone taps on it twice) or "not pok pok." But they're just getting started as these deadpan actors find a guitar and a speaker and a laptop computer.

Whenever you think they've reached the limit of any particular concept (like learning how to speak), the story is pushed forward via some new element. Suddenly they're on the phone with a French operator offering to sell them a starter pack of life and would they like to add on a package including the laws of thermodynamics? Or they're going through the five stages of grief or looking at a chronology of everything that has happened in the show we're watching...including a glimpse of what's going to happen later.

In the best tradition of Monty Python, it's silly/smart theater, uproariously funny at times, surprisingly touching at others. The cast is deadpan perfection and -- as it turns out -- none of them are professional actors, but artists in other areas who somehow became involved in this project. I would love to see it again, to bring friends, to recommend it to others. But I'll just have to content myself with waiting eagerly for whatever Halory Goerger and Antoine Defoort do next.

FIDDLER ON THE ROOF ** 1/2 BROADWAY THEATRE

After brilliant work reviving *South Pacific* and *The King And I*, director Bartlett Sher has turned his eye to that iconic warhorse *Fiddler On The Roof*. The first Broadway show to run more than 3000 performances, *Fiddler* was the biggest hit in history and has spawned countless community and high school productions over the years. It had also become encased in wax, the ghost of Zero Mostel and Topol hovering over any actor tackling the comic central role of Tevye and the genius of director-choreographer Jerome Robbins overwhelming anyone staging the show.

Happily, Sher has tackled the piece with fresh eyes, determined to treat it not as a nostalgic recreation of a classic but as if it were new. Unhappily, the big beneficiary of shaking up this treasure of a show with one of the great scores of all time is probably going to be the next person who mounts it. Sher's skill with classics have borne fruit repeatedly, not just with musicals but also dramas like *Joe Turner's Come And Gone* to *Awake And Sing!* For whatever reason, he stumbles here. Perhaps freeing *Fiddler* from its burdening history was accomplishment enough. And the songs are so strong -- and the cast here generally solid singers -- that the essential greatness of the work

still shines through.

By casting actor Danny Burstein as Tevye, we get exactly what we would expect: a more realistic, toned down, human Tevye. That's clearly the driving impetus of the show, from the modest, real world framing device (a tourist in Russia is exploring his roots) to the staging of each and every song. "Tradition," "Matchmaker, Matchmaker," "If I Were A Rich Man" and on and on they come.

But the numbers aren't delivered with show-stopping pizzazz, and intentionally so. The rhythm of these familiar tunes is sped up just a notch, so that they're tossed off with familiar ease, rather than lingering on the comic lines or "selling" them to the audience. The same is true of the dialogue and Tevye's bantering chats with Yahweh/God. The comedy is quietly underplayed, the Borscht Belt schtick that Mostel and Topol made hay with leavened with a little more salt, the humor left a little flatter so as not to over-inflate the show, like bread pulled out of the oven before it has a chance to rise.

Intellectually, this all makes sense. But when you underplay the humor, you get less humor. When you don't sell the songs, you get less razzle dazzle. And unfortunately, there's no corresponding increase in the drama. Yes, Tevye has five beautiful daughters and his plans with each and every one of them are foiled by the very thing he treasures the most: their high spirits and independence that he loves. Yes, the pogroms come ever closer. But the dire world closing in on this small shtetl seems no more ominous or threatening than usual. "We're Jews; did you expect a happy ending?" they seem to say as they're forced out of the only homes they've ever known.

Jessica Hecht is a fine foil as Tevye's wife Golde and though no singer,

she only has to really sing once. Burstein's great talent brings gravitas to the show's key moment when he rejects the daughter that married outside the faith and later relents and quietly gives her his blessing. For a brief moment, we see the more realistic, painful and moving show *Fiddler* might have been.

But too many factors war with Sher's desire. The set design by Michael Yeargan is very stylized and frankly underwhelming. Rarely do the scenes onstage conjured by Sher rise to striking or beautiful effect. And if you're going for a very realistic and human *Fiddler*, shouldn't perhaps the sets be more realistic and human too, rather than *less* real?

The supporting cast struggles. Adam Kantor is a good actor but the bumbling tailor Motel is a tricky part and he hasn't come close yet to figuring out a way to make Motel not seem to be stepping in from a very different, much lighter show. And the three daughters underwhelm, especially Melanie Moore as Chava. I should have recognized this talented dancer from the TV competition *So You Think You Can Dance*, which she deservedly won in Season Eight. (Maybe it was the glasses that kept me from spotting her?) But why she was cast in a part that's not really a dancer's role I can't say.

Even smaller details seem out of whack. Jesse Kovarsky as the Fiddler wanders around the set, somehow always seeming out of place and -- to my eye -- "fiddling" out of sync with the actual beautiful music emanating from the pit. In the chorus, two women doubled up with the men, dancing with them in male garb when not dressed as women, presumably an economizing gesture to fill the stage. It's a terrible decision, especially since they don't even keep the women-as-men discretely in the background. They constantly seem front and center, a distraction to say the least and a bad idea since gender separation is such an issue in this world. (Their dancing is not at issue.) Even worse, they are actually highlighted towards the end in a scene playing two young boys offered up as potential suitors to Tevye's remaining daughters. In other words, in case you weren't already distracted by their presence in the chorus, they make sure you spot them anyway.

Burstein's essential skill as an actor and his delight in taking center stage provides the night's best reason for being. And the songs remain a pleasure from beginning to end. This is an intelligent if failed tackling of a great show and far superior in its way to the misbegotten revival starring Alfred Molina from 2004. When another, greater revival of the show finally appears a decade from now, we can thank this one for paving the way.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof ** 1/2

Follow Michael Giltz on Twitter: www.twitter.com/michaelgiltz

CONVERSATIONS