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THE INN AT LAKE DEVINE **

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PAPERMILL PLAYHOUSE

It's 1945 and the war veterans (and war bride) in *The Bandstand* have a dream: making it in New York City. Their chance is a big band showdown where one lucky act with the best new song paying tribute to our troops gets a shot at movie immortality. Surely the talented folks behind this new musical have the same dream: making it in New York City.

Unquestionably, they've got a lot going for them: two very appealing leads, a brisk and propulsive visual style powered by director and choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler and a family friendly story with some bite (namely, soldiers suffering from PTSD, something rarely discussed in connection with World War II). A little more visual pizzazz (Cleveland doesn't look that different from NYC, for starters), some tightening in the books and lyrics, and especially a thoroughly reworked finale and they might well get there. As long as they're not in a rush like the crazy young people at the heart of this story.

Donny Novitski (Corey Cott) is back from the Pacific, sleepless from memories of war and ready -- no, desperate -- to get his musical career as a big band pianist back on track. His room at home with the folks is feeling pretty crowded when a voice speaks to him about a glimpse of the future. A voice on the radio, actually, telling about a nationwide contest: amateur bands from around the country will compete to represent their state with an original song honoring the troops. State winners get to appear on national radio and the champ gets their song in a big Hollywood movie where they even get to play themselves.

Donny doesn't lack for confidence but he also has a very clever idea: he'll build a hot new band out of fellow veterans, giving them the credibility to pay honor to those who served because they served. Smart guy. Donny recruits Jimmy who recruits Davy and before you know it they're off to the races. Donny's got gumption and a pretty pushy nature but by god he can write some catchy tunes. Still, as he confesses to Jimmy, Donny doesn't have the guts to look up the widow of his best pal in the Army, like he promised. He finally gets up the nerve and lo and behold Julia (Laura Osnes) is pretty and has great vocal chops and before you know it Donny's big band has a girl singer. This crazy dream just might work!

Essentially, *The Bandstand* is smooth entertainment as the description of its basic plot makes clear. It might have been as bland as the generic poster advertising the show. Instead, it consistently allows a darker thread to run through the story. Donny gets furious when a guy won't give him work and makes a crack about thanking him for his service. His fellow musicians have their own tics: one is compulsively rigid and neat, another is dim-witted after an accident in a jeep and takes endless pills, yet another drinks constantly to drown out memories of

Dachau and so on. The show would undoubtedly improve if those gritty impulses were encouraged even more. So many of these references (like one character being closeted) flit by so quickly you almost don't notice. And our hero's struggles shouldn't be so opaque: we're told repeatedly Donny can't sleep but you'd swear it has more to do with his drive to succeed as a composer, rather than nightmares from battle.

On the plus side, Blankenbuehler follows up his acclaimed work on Hamilton with marvelous direction and choreography. It's a good thing he did both here since they're so seamless in moving the story along. In the breathless opener, Donny is in the midst of war, discharged, reunited with his parents, dancing at a club with his mom and adjusting to civilian life, all in one convincing, character-defining whirl. Blankenbuehler's choreography is rooted in the dancing of the period but also incorporates everything from rigid military posture to boxing moves that reflect the inner turmoil of the veterans that is always simmering just beneath the surface.

Perhaps his peak is with the act one finale where the band receive a blow to their plans and crouch in pain, as if the news were an incoming shell. Donny begins a fevered, determined pep talk/call to arms "Right This Way" while crouched on the floor almost in fear before standing taller and taller. When the song is very good, as it is here, the show fires on all cylinders. When the songs are merely workmanlike (such as "First Steps First"), the talent involved makes you barely notice.

Cott is a terrific lead, playing a guy who can be pushy and determined and pretty damn annoyingly full of himself. Luckily, he has an old Hollywood charm that allows you to like him whatever his character may say or do. He was wasted in Gigi, but one sensed he was better than the material.. Given the chance to create an original role, Cott delivers. (He has a great Pal Joey in him, I'll bet.) He struts with confidence, dances with aplomb and you never doubt why the other guys eventually knuckle under and follow his lead.

Osnes is his equal as a dancer, all around performer, a stronger singer to boot and they have genuine chemistry. Thank goodness since their inevitable romance is so understated, you don't really get the sense of them struggling to contain their attraction until the very sexy "Give Me A Reason" pops up practically moments before the finale. Along with a few more beats about Donny's struggles with memories of the war, a greater sense of their sexual pull and guiltily ignoring it would add a lot of heat to their duets. Right now, those play more like hijinks among pals a la Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney. That's fine but a little more sizzle please.

Another lost thread: Donny's parents make a memorable impression at the beginning and then disappear. He might as well be an orphan. Julia's mother is luckier: played with skill and grace by Beth Leavel, Mrs. Adams also has one of the show's most pointed numbers. "Men Never Like To Talk" tackles the emotional shell shock of veterans with admirable directness and humor. (Other strong numbers include an ode to Cleveland called "I've Got A Theory" and "Love Will Come And Find Me Again" which is supposed to sound like a potential hit song from the big band era while telling the story of our characters and succeeds on both fronts.)

In an essential and smart move, Donny's fellow band members all play their instruments in the show. They create distinct characters and swing with authority. James Nathan Hopkins keeps Jimmy from being a nerdy cliché (or obvious closet case) and ditto Geoff Packard with his tightly wound Wayne. Brandon J. Ellis is clearly ready to play the brother of Zach Galifianakis, though again just a smidge more of the sense that he was out of control would be welcome. (One throw-away albeit dark line isn't enough.) Joe Carroll is good comedy relief as the drummer Johnny and Joey Pero is a sharp foil to Donny's imperious ways as Nick and of course he wails on the trumpet with assurance. And again, another beat with Donny acceding to Nick's ideas or treating him with respect would add to their storylines.

The lighting by Jeff Croiter and sexy, fun costumes by Paloma Young are top notch, aided naturally by the makeup, hair and wigs of J. Jared Janas & Dave Bova. David Korins' scenic design is effective and efficient, though again, despite a little neon the streets of New York didn't seem terribly different from the streets of Cleveland. The sound design by Nevin Steinberg was plagued by persistent technical issues throughout the

evening, but especially early in the show. The music direction and vocal arrangements of David Kreppel were excellent, powered by the strong orchestra both in the pit and onstage.

The music is by Richard Oberacker, with book and lyrics by him and Robert Taylor. Again and again, one wanted more. Not huge new scenes or lengthy back stories for each band member, but a moment or lyric here, a scene there that would deepen the story they're already telling. It's close but for the moment the nuance and subtlety that might raise the stakes for all involved is lost in the rush to get to the finale. If you've got a chance to see the show, skip below, where I discuss the finale. It's worth your time and we probably haven't seen the last of this.

SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT

The finale is an ambitious failure, admirable but wrong-headed in numerous ways. One easily understands it intellectually, but it doesn't fly dramatically. For various reasons, the band sets aside its sure-fire, contest-winning tune and plays a far more serious version of the tune "Welcome Home." This details in blunt terms the struggles each member of the band has faced. Frankly, it's way too nail-on-the-head lyrically and not that satisfying (though the melody saves it). Worse, the song is played in a discordant manner as if these G.I.s and their girl singer were having a nervous breakdown on stage while revealing their souls; it's almost as if they've invented free jazz 15 years before Ornette Coleman. Osnes tears into the tune but it's over-wrought. It would be far, far more believable to deliver an actual big band number that contained uncomfortable truths wrapped in the classic form of Tin Pan Alley. Instead, they've gone for a Dylan-goes-electric moment that's unjustified. Of course, they lose and the show peters to a close.

After that epic apotheosis, we flash forward to the band watching the movie they might have starred in. They good-naturedly dismiss it, then a teenage girl asks Donny for his autograph and mentions she'll be at his show tonight. He mumbles something dismissive like "That's sweet." Huh? Why is he being so jaded around a fan? Turns out they're now massive stars and the theater they've been at is now surrounded by a mob of autograph seekers. So now our head is spinning: they lose the big contest, make fun of the movie they didn't get to make and -- so we're told -- are now hugely popular. To cap it off, the two leads come out for their bows wearing sunglasses like Hollywood bigwigs. That's about two or three twists too many to be delivered in dialogue in the last minutes of the musical, none of it very interesting. And especially not when tipped off by Donny already taking it for granted -- has he learned nothing in this journey?

Luckily, it's easily fixed in numerous ways. They could lose the contest but a record label executive who says "I heard you guys warming up and love your songs!" could sign them. Or we could just see them laughing off their defeat because they kept their dignity, have a fellow soldier or citizen thank them for their song and they dive back into performing, Donny a little humbled and all of them ready to work for their dream. Fans could stream in by one and two as they whip into a final, rousing number until the stage is crowded with dancers and we could dream with them, rather than being told they've already made it and grown into satisfied fat cats. Really, anything like that will work better, especially if it lets them end by playing their music rather than filling in what happened and then walking out to flashbulbs. The message of *The Bandstand* (and it sure wouldn't hurt to come up with a better name too) is supposed to be that the music matters more than fame. Rushing to assure us they got fame and fortune anyway kind of spoils that.

THE GIN GAME ** GOLDEN THEATRE

Until now, I'd never seen *The Gin Game*. I knew it won the Pulitzer but I also knew it wasn't a vintage year for theater (its biggest competition was probably that middlebrow thriller *Deathtrap*). Of course, you always yearn to be surprised but it's only human to have certain expectations. I thought the story of two feisty old folk playing gin rummy at a nursing home would be some creaky but dependable comedy with a few home truths or modest

reveals of affection or backstory popping up between hands. You know, a predictable but surely well-constructed play. Maybe a better showcase for old folk than that sentimental drama *On Golden Pond*, which was enlivened mightily in the film by two titans.

But titans can do only so much. We're all there to see the great James Earl Jones and Cicely Tyson onstage, naturally. Still, even they can't do much with material this shockingly threadbare. And if one is honest, at roughly two decades older than Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy were when they turned this two-hander into a dependable moneymaker, even the modest physical demands of this show are perhaps just a tad out of their reach.

I assume classic gospel music wasn't wafting out of the windows of the nursing home when Cronyn and Tandy first appeared onstage. And I couldn't find out if the run-down clutter was in the original production. But make no mistake: the home where Weller (Jones) and Fonsia (Tyson) are trapped is a dump. Junk is piled up on the porch, an obvious symbolic example of how these two old folk have been tossed on the trash heap, forgotten by their families and friends (those that are still alive, that is). They don't have much but they have each other. A wary friendship springs up as Weller cajoles Fonsia into playing a little gin. She wins the first hand. And the second. And the third. And again and again and again. It would make a saint curse and Weller is no saint.

Act one is about what I expected: some obvious comedy beats put over by the brilliance exhibited by these two even in the twilight of their years. Act two however is a mess. The physical business that ends act one and appears in act two simply isn't convincingly staged: I was too worried for Tyson's safety to enjoy it and it felt more dangerous than funny or whatever they were going for. The "revelations" from each character are abrupt, forced, and unconvincing. It was sweet to see Tyson bouncing with pleasure when she finally convinced Jones to dance with her. But too often they must emote their way through confessions and confrontations and a bizarrely abrupt ending. And I've never felt such animosity for a scrim before: Riccardo Hernandez's work is painted with green leaves and dappled sunlight, heavy-handedly suggesting the gentle, nostalgic glow that his actual set tries to work against.

I'm sure the relatively younger and chipper Cronyn and Tandy (68 at the time compared to Tyson's remarkable 90) added a certain sharpness to the back-and-forth of this play that is lacking here. Nonetheless, it's a very, very poor play that has come back on Broadway about every 20 years...apparently just long enough for everyone to forget again what it's really like.

ROTHSCHILD & SONS ** 1/2 **THE YORK THEATRE COMPANY**

Bock and Harnick are in for some very promising few months on Broadway. First in December is a major revival of their blockbuster masterpiece *Fiddler On The Roof*. In the spring comes their charming *She Loves Me*, a musical spin on one of the greatest romantic comedies of all time, *The Shop Around The Corner*. And up first is this streamlined, one act rethinking of their Tony-winning musical *The Rothschilds*. Now called *Rothschild & Sons*, it focuses the story more tightly on the collaboration of father and sons in building up their financial powerhouse and then using that power to fight for the rights of Jews in Europe.

Hal Linden won the Tony playing Mayer Rothschild in the original and Robert Cuccioli is certainly the main attraction of this new mounting, bringing passion and smarts and an appealing vulnerability to the part.

I can't compare this to earlier productions, but apparently jettisoned is a romance subplot for the son Nathan in London. Instead, we see the indignities heaped upon Jews in the ghettos of Europe. Mayer Rothschild is smart and unflagging, building up a business from rare coins peddled with colorful anecdotes all the way to financial dealings with Prince William. But what he needs are sons! Sons can be depended on. Sons can become a network across the world. And sons are exactly what his wife Gutele provides, five to be exact. Before you know it, the Rothschilds are wealthy enough to attract the attention of major countries: locked in a battle with

Napoleon, they need the money of these Jews. And what do the Jews need? A little respect would be nice. They'll even give a discount in exchange for it.

Cuccioli is the heart of the show and a strong, vibrant presence. One can imagine him in Fiddler quite easily, though of course Mayer is a very different role. After him, the main attraction is the score by Bock and Harnick. It's filled with durable, hummable tunes and the small pit is actually a plus here, emphasizing an old world charm a larger group of musicians might have overwhelmed. Cuccioli is strong throughout but it's with "One Room" that Glory Crampton has her best moments as a long-suffering wife.

Jeffrey B. Moss directed and unfortunately a rather broad style of acting takes over. Mark Pinter hams it up mercilessly as Prince William (he is, happily, better as the hateful Prince Metternich). Crampton after an early good start becomes overly dramatic right up the finale. And the actors playing the five sons are all encouraged in a "kiddie" sort of over-acting as children which happily calms down once they get older. It's magnified by the intimate space of York Theatre, unfortunately. Ultimately, Christopher M. Williams (with the meaty role of Nathan) and the Robert Sean Leonard-like David Bryant Johnson come off best among the sons.

What remains is an excellent lead performance by Cuccioli, some good if spotty work by others and a showcasing of a score and book that certainly feels streamlined, focused and deserving of more sustained (and nuanced) attention down the road.

THE INN AT LAKE DEVINE **

TONGUE IN CHEEK THEATER

Naturally, you must love a book if you want to adapt it into a play. But you need to be ruthless too. A book is not a play and unless you're doing an eight hour complete reading of *The Great Gatsby* (hey, it worked!) something has to go. Or actually a lot of things.

Sadly, ruthlessness was not present when Jake Lipman adapted Elinor Lipman's novel *The Inn At Lake Devine* into a two and a half hour play that sags under the weight of so much material to tell so modest and familiar a tale.

A young Jewish girl (Jake Lipman) in the 1960s is shocked to find out that the cabin retreat where her best friend goes every summer refuses to book Jews. Feeling like a spy, Natalie Marx actually joins the Robin Fife (Maria Maloney) at the cabin one week. And like many a spy before her, Natalie feels she is soon uncovered by the waspy, icily disdainful Ingrid Berry (Jennifer Dorr White).

What follows are many, many years of simmering outrage. Natalie can't believe anyone would treat Jews differently. She becomes pen pals with the very nice husband of Ingrid. She and her friend Robin both get a crush on the handsome son. Years later Natalie becomes a chef and when the Inn at Lake Devine loses its chef, well, you can be forgiven for thinking ahead.

But the show chugs along, featuring a holiday song here, a visit to the doctor there, a romance, a tragedy and more, all in service of apparently capturing as many elements of a book Lipman clearly loved and wanted to do justice to in every way.

Editing is the new lazy shorthand of criticism. Such and such a movie should have been thirty minutes shorter. Garth Risk Hallberg's doorstop of a novel *City On Fire* should have been 400 pages shorter. That TV show *Homeland* should have been a miniseries, rather than stretching out its storyline for five years. And so on. Nonetheless, at two and a half hours, *The Inn At Lake Devine* is radically too long. It doesn't help that the one confrontation we want -- Natalie or someone confronting Ingrid once and for all -- barely happens and then is covered up with all-is-forgiven hugs at the end. Instead, we spend scene after scene watching one person after another confront the issue of anti-Semitism for the first time.

This hides some strength by the cast. Lipman anchors the show and keeps Natalie from becoming a tiresome scold, not easy given the repetition of the material. Jennifer Dorr White is convincingly cold. Andrew Spieker has some nicely truthful moments as Kris Berry, Andrew Dawson has real warmth as the father Karl Berry and Carson Lee has square-jawed appeal as Nelson Berry. But above all Maria Maloney is adorable as the young Robin Fife, capturing the wide-eyed delight in the world of kids without every playing down to the part.

Multiple performances of hymns and holiday songs add nothing to the atmosphere (and could have been hinted at in much shorter excerpts). And we really don't want to hear a family count down from 60 to 1 not once but twice. Yet when Maloney can bring a character to life and make us care about her, we can see a glimpse of the novel that inspired this passionate adaptation in the first place.

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

Da no rating

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