

## Theater: *Venice Underwater*; A Few Reasons to Be Happy

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**VENICE** no stars out of \*\*\*\*

**REASONS TO BE HAPPY** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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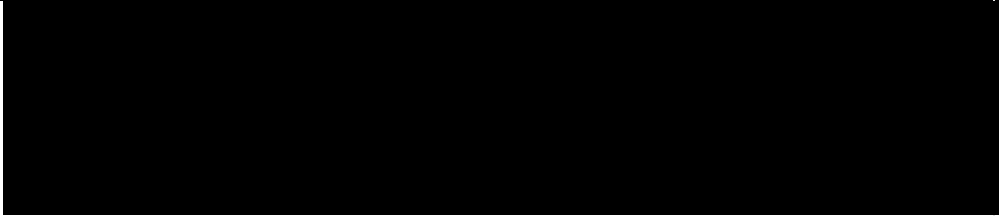
**PUBLIC THEATER**

Contrary to popular belief, it's no fun writing a negative review. It's a lot more fun to come out of a show bristling with excitement over talented performers and behind the scenes creative types whose work you're certain you'll be watching for years to come. Nothing like that happens at *Venice*, an incomprehensible mess of a show with a hackneyed plot, characters that don't maintain a shred of consistency from one scene to the next and relentlessly bad hip-hop lyrics.

The ringleader is the Clown MC, played by Matt Sax, who you feel sorry for until you realize he wrote the music and co-wrote the lyrics with director Eric Rosen, who also wrote the book. Sax struts around the stage like a peacock, flicking his hands this way and that with dramatic gestures as if he's in on the birth of *Rent* or *In The Heights*, despite delivering lyrics like, "Night blankets the sky/And ghosts roam the streets where they never quite died/ Meanwhile -- all alone -- /A story unfolds for the very first time/ On the eve of the turning tide/ Let's spy -- and see their history come to life." That's a very typical sample of the generic lyrics that combine cliches like "turning tide" with nonsensical ideas (ghosts that never died?) and awkward rhymes, all delivered in a bland rap style.

At least Sax seems somewhat comfortable in that genre. Most of the actors on stage are far less fluid in their rapping and the desire to belt out Broadway style comes over them from time to time. It doesn't help that they're trying to deliver bad hip-hop, mind you, amidst a story that makes no sense.

It's sort of *Othello* crossed with post 9-11 NYC. Venice is a generic city state that has been in a military lockdown since a terrorist attack 20 years ago. The 1%ers have fled to a safe zone ever since while the masses live under the boot heel of the military and private contractors led by Theodore Westbrook (Jonathan-David). All the main characters are the children of iconic figures. Westbrook is the son of the cruel figure of power hated by the people. Our hero Venice Monroe (Haaz Sleiman) confusingly has the same name as the country; he's the son (a child of rape) of a woman who called the people to resist and fight for freedom.



Both hunky young men are attracted to Willow (Jennifer Damiano), a girl so earnest and pure you know immediately she'll be martyred before the night is over. She's engaged to marry Westbrook but has always loved Venice -- both the man and the city; it really is annoying that you have to parse which one people are referring to throughout the night. She runs away from the safe zone, reunites with her childhood love and they pledge to get married.

The sight of the two young people uniting will apparently be enough to overthrow the military industrial complex once and for all. Enter our Iago, the half-brother of Venice and General of the military named Markos Monroe (Leslie Odom, Jr.). Markos plots to undermine one or both men, perhaps angling to make sure he's in favor with whomever wins or maybe just waiting to seize power himself.

Sax and Rosen struggle and fail to maintain any coherence from scene to scene. Willow left when she was 7 years old but immediately recognizes the General's wife, god knows how. Westbrook has been a cruel leader for years and represents everything Willow has risked her life to destroy once and for all but blandly tells Venice "he's my friend!" Um, why?

A Beyonce-like pop star named Hailey Daisy (Angela Polk) has slept her way through the hated military but is also for some reason a beloved figure of the resistance. Daisy knows the General has betrayed Venice and when she's captured and brought to Venice, she begs for protection, saying "He'll kill me." Who, asks Venice. "You know," she says, suddenly all coy even though she believes Markos will kill her the moment he can. When she spots Markos watching her interrogation, she still refuses to say he's a traitor. When she's being dragged away Daisy still doesn't scream out "It's Markos! It's Markos!" even though she's going to be handed over to him. Why? Who knows. Even the playwrights realized the absurdity and have her immediately gunned down offstage.

This is one tiny example of the plot's idiocy but the play is filled with them, along with lyrics of equal absurdity or simply flat banality. Venice's mother sings in a flashback to the baby Venice: "Markos be decent and generous/ Your brother is ahead of us/ A vision of the best of us/ That we can live as one/ Two worlds collide and fill his soul/ With wisdom we will never know/ Your brother will help your heart grow/ And learn to live as one."

When Willow's not singing "I can see the sunrise/ When I close my eyes," she must shoulder lyrics like this at a funeral: "I am a desert of unfulfilled memories/ Skeletal pictures of that which will never be/ What it is we dreamed/ Lost in the thoughts of what never was/ A child in a storm of madness because/ Death calls unspoken unseen." And so on.

Amidst all this mess, one doesn't want to single out actors for not performing well. The leads have no spark for each other or the material but how could they? The spurned Jonathan-David as Westbrook actually creates a few genuine moments of drama, in no small part due to the fact that he gets the closest to a decent song with a number that ends with the chorus "I want to love and be loved." Unfortunately, that line is reprised and repeated and beaten into the ground by the end of the show, along with the one about seeing the sunrise when you close your eyes.

In limited space, choreographer Chase Brock at times creates a good sense of energy among the cast, though the Itsy-Bitsy Spider routine with actors sort of twirling their fingers around while standing still didn't come off. Still, Brock and director Rosen kept things moving along somewhat. It didn't make any sense but it did chug along at times with some sorely needed energy. Uzo Aduba shamelessly over-emotes as the revolutionary

figure Anna, but under the circumstances what else could she do?

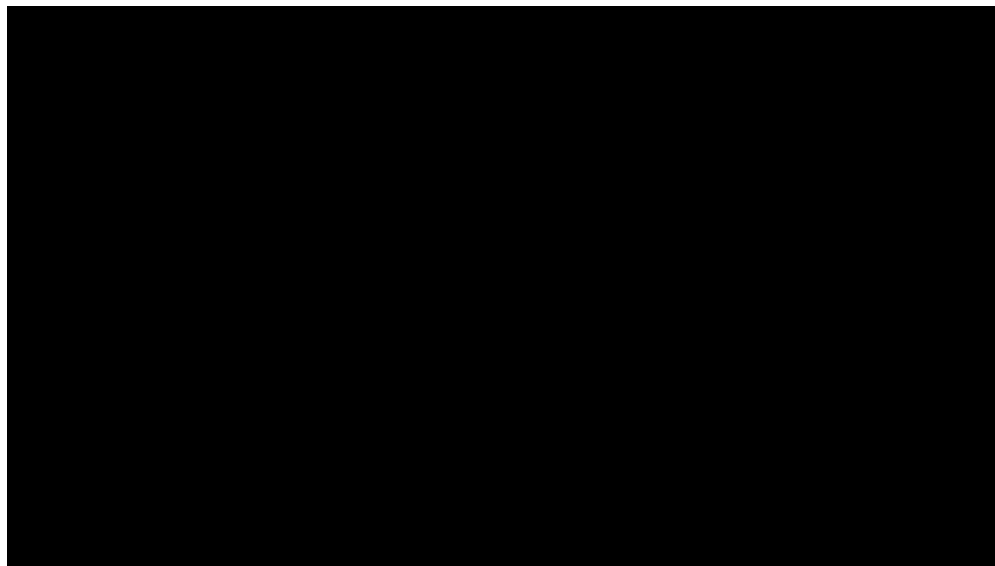
**REASONS TO BE HAPPY \*\* out of \*\*\*\***  
**MCC AT LUCILLE LORTEL THEATRE**

Playwright Neil LaBute is clearly entering a new, more humane phase of his career. The main women in his plays are still vicious ball-busters, but they seem to be aware of this and are at least a little more nuanced about it.

Said busting of balls begins right away when Steph (Jenna Fischer of *The Office*) bumps into her ex Greg (Josh Hamilton) in the parking lot of a grocery store. Furious that he's dating her best friend, Steph rips into Greg and his mousy, non-confrontational, book-reading ways, even as his ice cream bars melt and he lashes back once thoroughly provoked.

For those who caught his play *Reasons To Be Pretty* (in which Greg and Steph broke up when he admitted that he didn't think she was pretty), this is a sequel though it certainly stands on its own. Greg is a substitute teacher of some sort and dating Steph's old friend Carly (Leslie Bibb), the security guard at a factory he once worked in. Carly is the ex of Kent (Fred Weller), a dumb jock who considers Greg a friend but still pines for Carly. Though "pines" is not the right word for a lug like Kent. He has so few friends that Kent tries to talk to Greg about wanting to still bang Carly, which is a phrase more in keeping with Kent's lifestyle.

This awkward rondelay is disrupted when Steph tells Greg she wants him back and he realizes he still kind of wants her too. Is Steph just screwing with Greg to destroy his romance with her best friend? Is Greg running towards Steph or just running away from Carly? Will Kent beat him up now or later?



LaBute's plays and films have been notable for having high concepts and often a twist of some sort. Watching *Reasons To Be Happy* can create a false sense of insecurity among audiences who know his work. You keep waiting for the spin on the plot that never comes. It's like reading an O'Henry short story that *doesn't* employ a surprise ending.

That's a welcome development but too much of LaBute's waspishness shines through to make this tale wholly satisfying. First, there's his typical misanthropy. Greg is often reading a book (he's a teacher after all) but the other three characters are so aggressively dumb and disdainful of this that it beggars belief. Steph in particular seems far too intelligent to have never heard of the books he's read or see his reading as some sort of bizarre quirk. They're not ignorant in any interesting or amusing manner; it feels more like LaBute's problem than theirs, a setting up of a paper tiger that he can tear down or

just mock. Steph's never heard of Kurt Vonnegut? Fine, but that's neither funny or interesting.

Secondly, Greg is called out for avoiding confrontation and putting off decisions the entire play. But when he does it again at the finale in the most dramatic fashion possible, no one calls him on it and suddenly we're supposed to think the strong-willed Steph might be pining for him after all.

But a bigger problem than the script (which starts off strong in that parking lot scene but slowly peters out) is perhaps the casting. All four actors are solid onstage but they're all also a good ten or more years too old for these characters. Steph and Greg and the rest feel like they're in their late 20s, while all the actors are in their 40s (except for Bibb, who is 38). When Steph talks about wanting a baby at some point, you shouldn't be thinking that her biological clock is ticking and time's a wasting. But with this casting, that is inevitable.

All four actors are appealing and would have been ideal casting...a decade ago. The set by Neil Patel is notably lacking in imagination, with one office set and a few benches pushed together or pulled apart to stand in for every other location. Otherwise tech elements are fine. LaBute directed and he certainly encouraged a rounded, complete performance from the actors. He just didn't write a script that would allow them to deliver. It's an interesting but ultimately unsuccessful work that indicates some welcome growth from LaBute that might pay dividends down the road.

NOTE: In the comments below, a reader wrote in and suggested I was wrong in thinking that the characters in this play were in their late 20s. As support, they wrote that actress Marin Ireland was in her late 30s when playing Steph in the prequel *Reasons To Be Pretty* back in 2009. I pointed out that what's important is the age of the characters, not the age of the actors playing them. However, Marin Ireland contacted me and said that in fact the birth date the commenter provided was wrong and she was in her 20s when performing in the play. Finally, in the published edition of the play, Greg and Steph are described as mid-twenties while Kent and Carly are described as late twenties.

#### **THE THEATER OF 2013** (on a four star scale)

*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* \*\*\*

*Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery* \*\* 1/2

*The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County* \* 1/2

*Much Ado About Nothing* \*\*\*

*Really Really* \*

*Parsifal at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2

*The Madrid* \* 1/2

*The Wild Bride at St. Ann's* \*\* 1/2

*Passion at CSC* \*\*\* 1/2

*Carousel at Lincoln Center* \*\*\*

*The Revisionist* \*\*

*Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella* \*\*\*

*Rock Of Ages* \* 1/2

*Ann* \*\* 1/2

*Old Hats* \*\*\*

*The Flick* \*\*\*  
*Detroit '67* \*\* 1/2  
*Howling Hilda* reading \* (Mary Testa \*\*\*)  
*Hit The Wall* \*  
*Breakfast At Tiffany's* \* 1/2  
*The Mound Builders* at Signature \*  
*Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Cirque Du Soleil's Totem* \*\*\*  
*The Lying Lesson* \* 1/2  
*Hands On A Hardbody* \*  
*Kinky Boots* \*\*  
*Matilda The Musical* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream* \*\*\*  
*Motown: The Musical* \*\*  
*La Ruta* \*\* 1/2  
*The Big Knife* \*  
*The Nance* \*\*\*  
*The Assembled Parties* \*\* 1/2  
*Jekyll & Hyde* \* 1/2  
*Thoroughly Modern Millie* \*\* 1/2  
*Macbeth w Alan Cumming* \*  
*Orphans* \*\* 1/2  
*The Testament Of Mary* \*\* 1/2  
*The Drawer Boy* \*\*  
*The Trip To Bountiful* \*\*\*  
*I'll Eat You Last* \*\* 1/2  
*Pippin* \*  
*This Side Of Neverland* \*\*\*  
*A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney* \*\*\*  
*Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812* \*\*\*  
*Colin Quinn Unconstitutional* \*\* 1/2  
*A Family For All Occasions* \*  
*The Weir* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Disney's The Little Mermaid* \*\*  
*Far From Heaven* \*\*  
*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* \*\*  
*Somewhere Fun* \*\*  
*Venice* no stars  
*Reasons To Be Happy* \*\*

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**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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