

Theater: Violet Is Beautiful; Bullets Fires Blanks; James Franco's Broadway Debut

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VIOLET *** out of ****

BULLETS OVER BROADWAY ** out of ****

OF MICE AND MEN ** out of ****

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AMERICAN AIRLINES THEATRE AT ROUNDABOUT

Oh ye of little faith! Worshipping your false idols of expensive sets and fancy costumes! Indulging in the easy, familiar pleasures of jukebox musicals and shows lustfully based on movies! And TV shows! And (surely some day soon) video games!

These pagan ways have distracted you from the pure pleasure of theater. Luckily, in recent years our faith has been restored by simpler shows, plays like Peter and The Starcatcher and musicals like Once. And now Violet. It has a few chairs on stage to take the place of a bus. It has a bed rolled out for a hotel room and cleared away again for a dance hall. And that's about it for flash. But it has songs and a sweet story and a talented cast and really that's all you've ever needed. (A recent concert staging of Guys & Dolls at Carnegie Hall only reinforced this. Without a single set, that show could be transplanted to Broadway and pack 'em in.)

Violet (Tony winner Sutton Foster) is taking a trip. Disfigured as a child when her father is chopping wood and the ax flies off into her face, Violet is a no-nonsense, smart but deeply unhappy person. Filled with bitterness over this accident, she's never really forgiven her dad. Now she's headed from her tiny home town to the big city where Violet believes without question that a TV preacher will work a miracle and make her pretty.

Along the way she meets a nice little old lady and not one but two handsome, strapping GIs who fall head over heels in love with this woman so ghastly in appearance that everyone who meets her flinches at first. Will the

miracle take place on her face or in her heart? No points for guessing.

This tale is the Broadway revival of a show that played Off Broadway to much acclaim in the 1990s and has been done regionally ever since. With music by Jeanine Tesori and a book and lyrics by Brian Crawley, it draws upon folk, bluegrass, country, blues and gospel to craft a string of songs that are always solid and sometimes inspired. The simplicity of the staging works hand in hand with the down-home stylings of the score and they've even avoided a momentum-killing intermission since none is called for dramatically.

The result is a charming, low-key musical with some rousing numbers, an affecting story and a lot of talent on display. Based on the short story "The Ugliest Pilgrim" by Doris Betts, it offers few surprises. But there are some. Notably, that TV preacher (well played by Ben Davis) is not a cynical huckster and even offers Violet some sound counsel. And Violet comes to peace with some of her anger without having to spell out in tedious fashion the lessons she has learned. The sets by David Zinn are effective in their simplicity. And the costumes of Clint Ramos and hair and wigs of Charles G. LaPointe let a team of actors tackle numerous supporting roles with ease, especially Annie Golden, who has a blast switching from that little old lady and a seedy hooker.

What keeps Violet from greatness is a rushed story that stretches credulity. Handsome men are so smitten by her that you might leave the show wondering where you can get your own disfiguring scar. More to the point, the story of the two GIs and how they fall for her doesn't quite make emotional sense. Violet is clearly drawn to Flick (Joshua Henry), even though he feels restrained at first. When her overtures are not enough, it's easy to see why Violet spends the night with the dashing handsome Monty (Colin Donnell). We know he's a good time Charlie and can imagine Violet hasn't had many opportunities for intimacy so that's perfectly fine, even if her heart pines for Flick.

But then several things happen: Monty becomes reformed and wants to share his life with Violet and Violet returns from her meeting with the preacher to breathlessly wait for Monty. Monty? Wait, this whip-smart woman is now in love with him? Even though she knows full well he's not the one for her? As if that isn't enough, somehow she pivots on a dime, sends him on his way and embraces Flick after all. This circuitous route to where we knew the show was headed all along diminishes Violet (she's smarter than that) and Flick and Monty. We're supposed to be moved that Flick sees the beauty in Violet's face while Monty tells her the obvious -- the miracle didn't happen. But since they both see the beauty in her (Monty wants to marry her as well, after all), it hardly seems like a damning moment for him.

Despite this last-minute traffic jam of emotions, the show sweeps to its finale with a strong final number and a delicate, closing note that feels just right. Other musical highlights include the gospel number "Raise Me Up" (put across with just the right amount of fervor and self-aware performance by Rema Webb) and the scene-setting "On My Way." Alexander Gemignani is sensitive as Violet's father, but it's the new men in her life that make the biggest impression. Donnell is so rakishly appealing as Monty, you can easily see Violet torn between the two. Henry (so good in *The Scottsboro Boys*) is magnetic as a natural leader of men. He kills the big solo number "Let It Sing," though I'd churlishly suggest it would have been even more powerful without the extended, gospel-like flourishes at the end. (That also seemed out of character for the straight-forward, no-nonsense Flick.) But don't get me wrong: it's a deservedly show-stopping number.

Foster of course is the heart and soul of the show. She's utterly winning as Violet, to the point where it's easy to forget the painful reality of her life that should be uppermost in our minds. Sure, she makes herself seem a little plain. But I do wonder what it would be like if the show went in the direction of the movies *Mask* or *The Elephant Man* and didn't leave her disfigurement just to our imagination. Of course, it's a universal tale: many feel ugly or unloved in some way, often in ways that others wouldn't even recognize. So we always see the strong, appealing woman underneath the scar. It's no surprise when she embodies the role and sings it so winningly on "Surprise" and "Look At Me" and every other number she tackles in this show.

The Roundabout has taken the slam dunk route of reviving Cabaret with Alan Cumming. (Why not? Stars have returned to their greatest roles repeatedly ever since theater began.) Wouldn't it be sweet if they also discovered a money maker in this sweet, simple, unadorned story of faith and love?

BULLETS OVER BROADWAY ** out of **** **ST. JAMES THEATRE**

A shrug is certainly not the reaction producers are looking for from their new musical comedy. But when people ask what I thought of it, a shrug feels about right. It's watchable, has some good performances and some good dancers and some great sets. But it never comes close to adding up to anything you care about. So you shrug.

Adapted by Woody Allen from the screenplay of his film (which was co-written with Douglas McGrath), Bullets is a backstage story seemingly ripe for musicalizing. David Shayne (the appealing Zach Braff in his Broadway debut) is a fiery playwright of high ideals and no success or even discernible talent. When a gangster (Vincent Pastore) needs a vehicle for his girlfriend, suddenly David gets to write and direct his own play, with the tiny caveat that the squeaky-voiced, defiantly untalented moll Olive (Helene York) gets a part. He won't compromise; he refuses to compromise; he wouldn't dream of compromising. But maybe this one time. Along for the ride is her bodyguard Cheech (Nick Cordero), a quiet killer who proves a much better script doctor (and indeed playwright) than our nebbishy dreamer David.

It's filled with stock theater types like the egotistical aging diva (a very funny Marin Mazzie) and a leading man who gorges on food (Brooks Ashmanskas, fine in a modest part). Director Susan Stroman choreographs some terrific hoofers in solid, Busby Berkeley-like numbers and the sets by Santo Loquasto are endless and endless impressive. (Give him a million bucks and he'll give you five million worth of pizzazz, apparently.) But there are problems galore.

Many complained that the show pulled together a grab-bag of old tunes rather than crafting an original score. But we could all name a string of classic shows built upon pre-existing songs. The problem is that many of them were songs plugged into a classic romance where all sorts of love songs will work. Bullets Over Broadway on the other hand is a very specific comedy with distinctive characters and any old standard just won't do.

"Don't Speak" would have been a likely comic number for Marin Mazzie's Helen Sinclair. Instead she sings "There's A Broken Heart For Every Light On Broadway." Every song has something at least nominally to do with the moment at hand. And after the first two numbers ("Tiger Rag" and "Gee Baby, Ain't I Good To You") I thought, this is fine. It doesn't matter. But as the show progresses and the songs seem increasingly disconnected to the matter at hand, it proved harder and harder to overlook. When "Cheech" sings the lovelorn blues number "Tain't Nobody's Biz-ness If I Do," the audience actually loves it because he's the most winning character in the musical (and film). But this song of being defiant over being misused by a lover has nothing, absolutely nothing to do with Cheech's situation. Hearing "Yes, We Have No Bananas" tossed in nonsensically at the finale is one thing. Hearing every other number seem just as random before that is the real problem.

And who is singing these songs? Braff is of course the stand-in for Allen and a fine one, it seems. (Though John Cusack from the film might have been one of the best ever, so he's got big shoes to fill.) His first number is a modest little duet with David's sweetheart Ellen (Betsy Wolfe, in a thankless, anonymous role). They sing "Blues My Naughty Sweetie Gives To Me" and Braff strums a uke and it's fine. But as the show continues his vocal demands are increasingly bigger and all the punched-in spotlights and choreographic distraction can't disguise the fact that he's not up to the demands vocally. Any show can afford one role with an actor charming their way through the numbers. But Bullets has Braff and the vocally underwhelming Cordero and the vocally non-existent Pastore of The Sopranos stiffly walking his way through two big numbers. Toss in Yorke who's not supposed to be a good singer as Olive and you're looking at a lot of numbers led by people who intentionally or not are suspect vocally.

If only these numbers were interrupting an hilarious story, it might be alright. But Yorke flops in the can't miss ditz role of Olive. "The Hot Dog Song" is a lame novelty number filled with single entendres that Yorke can't do anything with, silly hot dog costumes or not. Cordero and Mazzie shine best in the best roles from the film. The wonderful Karen Ziemba has literally nothing to do as an actress who carts around a little dog and speaks pig Latin. I didn't even realize pig Latin was supposed to be a defining trait of hers until it was dragged out again at the finale (she only did it once before, I think). Other than that, her main task is to hold the dog and then face it away from the audience when a prerecorded mutt yaps along rhythmically for a laugh. Oy.

And the finale. "Yes, We Have No Bananas" -- okay, I'm on board at the end for a completely random bit of nonsense. Maybe giving up on the story completely will let us have a little goofy fun. But it's begun by Pastore, features that pig Latin "joke," and everyone takes their turn...and there's not a banana in sight. Yes, I know, they're saying they have no bananas but when did logic get in the way of fun? This show looks like a million bucks (or \$15 million, given the rising cost of staging a Broadway show) and they couldn't bring on some bananas? I expected Carmen Miranda-like headgear and bananas falling from the sky and people in banana costumes and I got nothing.

It didn't help that I saw a glorious concert version of Guys & Dolls (the ultimate musical comedy with gangsters) just a short time ago. There is a lot of talent on display here, which is why the evening is pain-free and has its moments (especially with Mazzie). But even if you haven't seen the movie Bullets Over Broadway in a long time -- or ever -- you'll know something is missing when you come out of this show whistling about the sets.

OF MICE AND MEN ** out of **** LONGACRE THEATRE

It shouldn't be a surprise that I can't recommend Of Mice And Men for the simple fact that I don't particularly like Of Mice And Men. The John Steinbeck novella is a staple of schools much like the John Knowles novel A Separate Peace. They're short, they're "sad," and they're very teachable. For generations, students have been asked "What do the bunny rabbits represent?" and they probably always will.

Even as a child, I found Steinbeck's tragic tale rather heavy-handed and repetitive. Whatever modest power it holds on the page is diminished greatly when it comes to the stage. There the static nature of the story, the banal trajectory of the characters from A to A (not even A to B) is clear and what seems thin becomes transparent. This sensitive revival by Anna D. Shapiro has a generally excellent cast, all the good intentions in the world and leaves you unmoved.

George (James Franco) and Lennie (a wonderful Chris O'Dowd) are best pals. They travel the country looking for work in the midst of the Great Depression. George is a smart, savvy guy and Lennie is slow, a not so gentle giant who is dangerously strong and sweet by nature but prone to getting into trouble. They were driven out of their last town when Lennie started to pet the pretty silk skirt of a woman and frightened her half to death. So they're back on the road, trying to stay out of trouble and sharing the dream of somehow, someday buying a place of their own and living off the fat of the land.

Lennie doesn't like the new place they've arrived at and with good reason. The son of the overseer is Curley (Alex Morf), a bitter tempered, jealous little guy always picking fights and driven to distraction by the wandering eye of his new wife. Curley's wife (Leighton Meester) is trouble from the word go, constantly wandering into the bunkhouse where the laborers rest and getting everyone hot and bothered. Some of the guys are nice: Candy (the great Jim Norton) is a harmless, one-armed old man with a smelly dog and Slim (a very good Jim Parrack of True Blood) is a decent sort. But George and Lennie will be lucky to get to the end of the month without trouble engulfing them one way or another.

A story of the Great Depression, of people who slave away for pitiful wages and can barely dream of getting ahead much less getting something of their own? It's all painfully relevant. The show is best at capturing the

tenuous hopes and fears of these men, including Ron Cephas Jones as Crooks, the black laborer who is the only person the other laborers can look down upon and feel superior to someone. Watching Candy and Crooks latch onto the dream of George and Lennie like a life raft is the most affecting moment of the show.

But there's precious little drama. Meester is very beautiful but has no stage presence or the ability to shape her performance. This floozy, this dangerous beauty, doesn't come across as the destabilizing force she should. More importantly, every single character is exactly what they seem to be from the first moment we see them: the lovable Lennie, the grumpy but kind George, the solid Slim, the flirty woman, the mean as a skunk Curley and so on. We don't get to know a single one of them because there's nothing to know.

They're archetypes, paper-thin ideas of people with one or two ideas repeated over and over ("Where's my wife?" "Tell me about the farm, George") until it ends cheaply and sadly. An old smelly dog isn't the only one that will be gunned down and the laborers are all too aware they'll be lucky if it doesn't happen until they're old and worn out.

The scenic design by Todd Rosenthal is handsome and works well with the fine costumes of Suttirat Larlarb and the effective lighting of Japhy Weideman. The cast is generally strong. Jones and Norton both have a few good moments, making us believe these stock roles have some genuine inner life. Parrack makes a very good impression in a similarly thin part. Morf maybe slams one too many doors but is believably insecure. Meester has been good on film (notably Country Strong) but needs a lot more time on stage before returning to Broadway). Franco -- grading on a curve, because his peripatetic career is admirable -- proves a likable presence. His performance isn't terribly shaded but he holds his own amidst a superior cast.

Franco and everyone else benefit greatly from acting alongside O'Dowd, who is wonderful in the showiest, most appealing role this play has to offer. Lennie should be a slam dunk but that doesn't mean he will be. O'Dowd brings him to life, allows Lennie to be a little scary with his furious outbursts, gets humor without pandering and generally does everything one can with the part. It's not his fault Steinbeck wrote a play that sacrifices Lennie to an unthinking world before that world has truly been brought to life. You can't have tragedy in a fable, just a lesson to be learned. The lesson here is that great actors will make the most of even so-so material.

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