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## Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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# Theater: Woody Allen Plus Elaine May Plus Ethan Coen = Meh

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**RELATIVELY SPEAKING** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**BROOKS ATKINSON THEATRE**

Seeing a show just after it opens can be great fun. Strong reviews make everyone happy -- the audience is thrilled to be there (they feel so smart!) and the cast is confident. Mixed reviews; poor reviews? Well, the cast has something to prove and sometimes the audiences says "critics, who needs 'em; we like it!" (If an audience member sees a bad show *before* it opens, then they *love* being a critic and get to tell their friends, "Stay away!") The least enjoyable possibility when seeing a show after it opens is that it gets bad reviews and everyone just politely soldiers on as best they can. The pros on stage

muster what enthusiasm they can ("Should I pause for another beat here? Maybe that'll get a laugh.") and the audience does its best to be encouraging and not look at their watches too often.

Sadly, the latter is the case for *Relatively Speaking*, three one acts with a cast of 15 and direction by John Turturro. I wouldn't single out any of them for the mess here. That rests squarely with writers Ethan Coen, Elaine May, and Woody Allen.

**TALKING CURE** \* out of \*\*\*\*

Coen's play is split into two parts. It opens in a fenced off area at a mental hospital, with a doctor (Jason Kravitz) trying to engage a new patient (Danny Hoch) in therapy. "Why do you think you're here?" is a

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typical opening line, with Hoch's wily patient not giving in on anything, not on the assault he committed at a post office on a customer who hadn't taped her package up properly, not on the idea that he's got problems, not on his mother, not on nothin'. It's a game of ping pong, but not a terribly interesting one. The blackouts between scenes seem to take far longer than necessary and ultimately it just peters out. I assumed that was the end of the piece but in fact it wasn't over.

The set split in two, with each man moving to an opposite side of the stage, bathed in darkness and sitting on a chair while a dining room set (mounted high on a platform, for no discernible reason) moved to the center of the stage. (It's hard to get inspired by poor material, but this particular set design by the great Santo Loquasto is a puzzle.) We soon realize it's the parents of the patient; they're bickering and fighting on the night when he's going to be born. With the doctor and patient as solemn witnesses, the parents kvetch with each other. We're expected to gain some insight into him, I suppose, but since we barely know the patient or even really what he's done, there's no mystery to solve. The parents (Allen Lewis Rickman and Katherine Borowitz) are given slightly peppier, funnier dialogue, but only slightly. This too just peters to a close. Coen's play barely even constitutes a rough draft for a one act.

#### GEORGE IS DEAD \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

Elaine May's one act has the benefit of featuring the night's most fully realized performance, thanks to Marlo Thomas. She totters on stage as Doreen, a self-absorbed rich woman who shows up on the doorstep of the daughter of her childhood nanny, a nanny she hasn't spoken to for decades. (How the shallow and indifferent Doreen would know where to find the married daughter of a nanny she hasn't spoken to in 30 or 40 years is the sort of question one isn't meant to ask.) "George is dead!" announces Doreen. Her husband has died on a ski slope in Aspen and Doreen is at her wit's end, which clearly doesn't take much. The overwhelmed Carla (Lisa Emery) soon finds herself playing nanny as well by scraping salt off of Doreen's crackers, finding her a nightie, giving her a couch to sleep on, etc. It's nothing terribly new, but Thomas has fun with this privileged, silly woman.

In bursts Carla's husband (they'd been fighting) and they have it out again as the play turns a tad more serious. Fewer and fewer laughs appear as the husband leaves and next morning the nanny, the beloved aged nanny, arrives to dress Doreen for the funeral. This piece is the only one to really even attempt a kicker, a closing line meant to nail the humor on the head as the curtain falls. It doesn't work (the anger is misplaced, really, so the joke doesn't land and after so much seriousness it kind of seems serious, too). But at least she tried.

#### HONEYMOON MOTEL \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

It's a pretty generous two stars out of four, but at least Woody Allen's playlet has some rat-a-tat humor. Like the tired routine Allen tosses in about the terrible food back in the old country, the jokes are pretty awful, but there sure are a lot of 'em.

In this light comedy, Steve Guttenberg is head over heels in love with his much-younger bride (Ari Graynor) as they giggle their way into a tacky motel room. When Guttenberg's best pal shows up, the



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premise is revealed: Guttenberg is the *father* of the intended groom (his stepson), but right before she said "I do" he shouted out that he loved her and they ran off together. You will not be surprised when the doorbell rings again and again as Guttenberg's wife, the parents of the bride, the groom, the rabbi and even a pizza delivery guy all crowd into the room, each and every one of them armed to the teeth with one-liners that were old when Henny Youngman was a kid.

The rabbi keeps quoting Biblical tales with no relevance, the bride's mother is also a compulsive cheater, and in one of Allen's most tiresome cliches, Guttenberg is a writer of arid post-modern works of literature who resents his stepson's bestselling popular fiction.

Thank G-d with the likes of Julie Kavner, Richard Libertini, and Mark Linn-Baker around, the easy lay-ups Allen offers can at least be slammed home with authority. The finale typifies the entire evening, since Allen didn't bother coming up with one. Sure, the pizza guy (Hoch again) delivers his verdict on who's to blame for this mess, but really everyone just sort of runs out of steam and then files out so Guttenberg and Graynor can get down to business. Needless to say, the curtain drops before the real action begins.

#### The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four star scale)

*The Agony And The Ecstasy Of Steve Jobs* \*\* 1/2  
*All's Well That Ends Well/Shakespeare in the Park* \*\*  
*Broadway By The Year: 1997* \*\* 1/2  
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*Master Class w Tyne Daly* \*\* 1/2  
*Measure For Measure/Shakespeare in the Park* \*\*\*  
*The Mountaintop* \*\* 1/2  
*Newsies* \*\*  
*Olive and The Bitter Herbs* \*\* 1/2  
*One Arm* \*\*\*  
*Relatively Speaking* \* 1/2  
*The Select (The Sun Also Rises)* \*\* 1/2  
*Septimus & Clarissa* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Silence! The Musical* \* 1/2  
*Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark* \* 1/2  
*The Submission* \*\*  
*Sweet and Sad* \*\*  
*Unnatural Acts* \*\*\*  
*We Live Here* \*\*  
*Zarkana* \*\*

#### NEW YORK MUSICAL THEATRE FESTIVAL 2011

*Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Wild Prairie Dame* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Central Avenue Breakdown* \*\* 1/2  
*Crazy, Just Like Me* \*\*\*  
*Cyclops: A Rock Opera* \*  
*Ennio: The Living Paper Cartoon* \*\* 1/2  
*F---ing Hipsters* \*\*  
*Ghostlight* \*\*  
*Gotta Getta Girl* \*\* 1/2 for staged reading  
*Greenwood* \*  
*Jack Perry Is Alive (And Dating)* \* 1/2  
*Kiki Baby* \*\* 1/2  
*Kissless* \* 1/2  
*Madame X* \*\*  
*The Pigeon Boys* \*\*\*  
*Time Between Us* \* 1/2  
*Tut* \*\*



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*Paper Cuts*\*\*\*  
*Parker & Dizzy's Fabulous Journey To The End Of The Rainbow*\*\* 1/2  
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*Rachel Calof*\*\* 1/2  
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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 was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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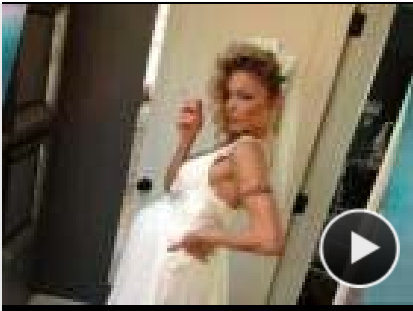
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