



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

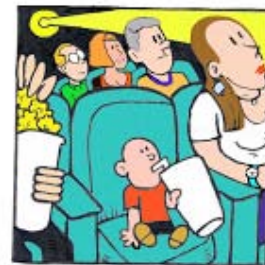
THEATER: "Einstein's Dreams" Too Elusive For Reality

EINSTEIN'S DREAMS * 1/2 out of ******PROSPECT THEATER COMPANY AT 59E59**

Alan Lightman's charming novel *Einstein's Dreams* was a best-selling sensation in 1992. Lightman's day job is a physicist and his first and best work of fiction playfully combines both disciplines. In it, he imagines Einstein is working on his Theory of Relativity and dreams about the various ways one can think about time. What if time really did stand still? What if time proceeded in circles? Or skipped and stuttered or reversed itself unexpectedly? Each dream of time is captured in a fragmentary passage lasting just a few pages at most. It's not really a novel or even a collection of short stories, but more like a variation on a theme.

Lightman lets you feel you grasp certain abstract scientific ideas, all while entertaining you thoroughly. But there's no plot to speak of, no over-arching thread. It's just fanciful fun. Even the packaging of the book added to its appeal: *Einstein's Dream* was about 5 inches wide by 7 inches tall, almost a square, friendly little book. It fit into your hands comfortably and made this Italo Calvino-like work quite approachable. Instead of thinking, a book about physics and running away, you saw it and smiled and picked it up.

I read it, I enjoyed it and not for a single moment did I think, this should be adapted for the stage! It's one of those works that would seem to resist a transformation into film or theater or TV. Of course, I felt the same about Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Turn that daunting, philosophical novel into a film? Absurd! Turn the classic Powell-Pressburger movie *A Matter Of Life and Death* into a stage play? Ridiculous!



Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in NYC and can be reached at mgiltz@pipeline.com

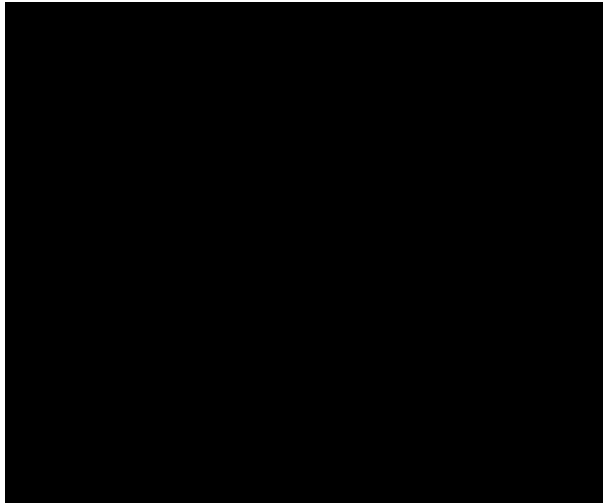
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▼ [2019](#) (89)▼ [November](#) (9)[THEATER: "Pump Girl" Finds A](#)

Well, as a film, *Unbearable* became another masterpiece. As a play, *A Matter Of Life and Death* was a disaster. But hey, they tried! So anything can be turned into anything else and the less likely, perhaps the more remarkable it will be if you get the alchemy right.



Apparently, people have been trying and trying with *Einstein's Dreams* ever since it was published. Per Wikipedia, this work has been adapted endlessly into plays and song cycles and dance pieces and here a musical, one that first debuted in 2005. As far as I know, none of them have worked. This version is no different. Joanne Sydney Lessner did the book and Joshua Rosenblum did the music and they both worked on the lyrics. Here, Time is personified into a dream-like lover for young Albert Einstein. He keeps dreaming of Time in all her fickle possibilities and she teases him on towards the revelation of the Theory that will make him immortal.

Little of this works, despite a game cast that struggles to sing the awkward songs the creative team crafted. However, the Prospect Theater Company has given this ineffective mess directed by Cara Reichel an exceptionally handsome production. Einstein's desk at the patent office sits on a round dais stage left. A staircase on stage right swoops up to a wide platform on the second level. Striking design work covers the stage floor with expected but effective details of time and the such. And a giant round clock face hangs above the stage, serving as a screen for countless projections, the vast majority of which are impressive and on point.

David Bengali did the excellent projection design and Sidney Shannon the period-friendly costumes. Kevin Heard dealt with the sound design that balances actors, singers and a fine six-piece orchestra led by music director and pianist Milton Granger, not to mention various subtle sound cues. And the ravishing scenic design is by Isabel Mengyuan Le. It's a pleasure to behold while you wait for the show to begin and something to study when the show quickly goes awry. I remember very little of the musical's feverish attempts to give the erudite and funny and odd musings of Lightman some sort of plot. But the set? I'd love to spend more time with it.

Gusher At Irish Rep

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Bedlam In Every Way

THEATER: "Einstein's Dreams"
Too Elusive For Real...

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► [October](#) (21)

► [September](#) (10)

► [August](#) (9)

► [July](#) (7)

► [June](#) (3)

► [May](#) (6)

► [April](#) (10)

► [March](#) (5)

► [February](#) (1)

► [January](#) (8)

► [2018](#) (38)

► [2017](#) (6)

► [2016](#) (2)

► [2015](#) (22)

► [2014](#) (2)

► [2013](#) (5)

► [2012](#) (17)

► [2011](#) (15)

► [2010](#) (10)

► [2009](#) (43)

► [2008](#) (86)

► [2007](#) (781)

► [2006](#) (2412)

► [2005](#) (5)

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White Noise ** 1/2
Kiss Me, Kate ***
Ain't No Mo' *** 1/2
Ain't Too Proud **
The Cradle Will Rock * 1/2
Mrs. Murray's Menagerie *** 1/2
Oklahoma! (on Broadway) ** 1/2
Socrates **
The Pain Of My Belligerence *
Burn This **
Hadestown *** 1/2
All My Sons * 1/2
Tootsie ** 1/2
Ink ***
Beetlejuice **
Estado Vegetal ***
Hans Christian Andersen * 1/2
Cirque du Soleil: Luzia ***
BLKS ** 1/2
Moulin Rouge ** 1/2
Bat Out Of Hell **
Unchilding **
Sea Wall/ A Life ** 1/2
Harry Potter and the Cursed Child ***
Betrayal *** 1/2
Fifty Million Frenchmen ** 1/2
Freestyle Love Supreme ** 1/2
Derren Brown: Secret ***
(A)loft Modulation * 1/2
The Great Society **
I Can't See *
Heroes Of The Fourth Turning ** 1/2
Chasing Rainbows: The Road To Oz ***
The Glass Menagerie (dir Austin Pendleton & Peter Bloch) **
Terra Firma (debut of The Coop theater company) **
Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation ***
Dublin Carol ** 1/2
Soft Power **
The Decline and Fall of The Entire World As Seen Through The Eyes
Of Cole Porter ***
For Colored Girls ** 1/2
Scotland, PA **
The Sound Inside *** (great cast, clumsy ending)
User Not Found **

[Enchanted April](#) **

[DruidShakespeare: Richard III](#) * 1/2

[Broadbend, Arkansas](#) **

[Einstein's Dreams](#) * 1/2

[The Crucible](#) (by Bedlam)

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THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "The Crucible" Is Bedlam In Every Way

THE CRUCIBLE *** 1/2 out of ****

BEDLAM AT THE CONNELLY THEATER

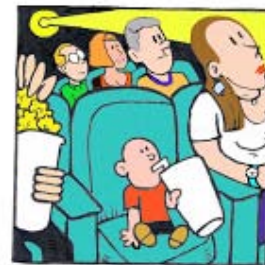
I wasn't in the mood to see a new production of *The Crucible*. That's hard to justify since it's my favorite Arthur Miller play and the all-but-forgotten film version is to my mind a masterpiece. Plus, I've never seen a great stage production. But there you are: I just wasn't in the mood. It can run nearly three hours! And didn't we just see it? Yes, if by "just" you mean three years ago on Broadway.

So what? It's Bedlam and that much-lauded company has mounted some of the best shows in recent years. If it's faced a little bedlam off-stage, well that might just be the kick in the pants it needs after some recent work that was less thrilling than usual. Whatever the reason, whatever the cause, it turns out I *was* absolutely in the mood to see a new, strong production of *The Crucible*. Indeed, three exceptionally well-acted, entertaining hours with Bedlam is far preferable to a 70 minute show with no intermission that plods along.

A modest caveat: it is three hours and the Connelly has just one tiny, unisex bathroom with three stalls. So plan accordingly. The only torture should be onstage, not while you wait anxiously in line during intermission.

But do plan to see it. This *Crucible* thrillingly reminds us why Bedlam made such a stir in the first place. Their production is beautifully cast, fluidly directed and so clear-eyed that what you're seeing is not some flashy troupe calling attention to itself or imposing some conceit on top of a show. What you see is a great play held up to the light.

The first clever touch is the staging. A semi-circle of seats are on the stage area while most of the audience is seated stadium style. The



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Connelly also has a second level with lighting and the such so the sense of a world on trial is vivid. You enter the theater and go around a hanging bit of plastic to this area. But when the show begins that plastic collapses and the first scenes are staged in the "lobby" area. It immediately expands your ideas of where the story begins and ends.

Those opening moments are performed in a manic, almost vaudevillian style. It's hyped-up realism and off-putting. But before you know it the show settles down into naturalism. I seem to recall this Bedlam gambit before: open with an artificial style that underlines the theatricality of what you're seeing and then the vast majority of the play will seem all the more "real" thanks to the contrast. My guest says I'm nuts and they haven't done this before. Whatever your thoughts on this throat-clearing approach to the text, it passes quickly.

Soon you're caught up in Arthur Miller's drama, famously written in the heat of the McCarthy Era. It's the late 1600s at the Massachusetts Bay Colony and teen girls are caught dancing in the woods. This is scandalous and one of them collapses into a faint. Or perhaps she just feigns illness out of fear for her preacher father's anger. Nonetheless, her sleep seems bizarre, so a Rev. Hale is called in to rule out anything unnatural (ie demonic). Before you can say "broomstick," accusations of witch craft are flying.

The girls put the blame for their misdeeds on a Bahamian servant and she turns it right back on them. The net widens. More and more women are accused of witchery. One woman insists a midwife is a witch, merely because this woman resents giving birth to one stillborn child after another. One man accuses another simply because he lusts after the fellow's land.

Hovering about them all is Abigail, the teen who leads the other girls in panicked testimony about witches and possession and being unable to breathe when a sinner scoffs at them. Abigail slept with the married man John Proctor only to be turned out by his wife. She bluntly tells John his wife will die and Abigail can take her place. John must sully his good name to reveal Abigail's treachery and even then, who will believe him? The town has gone mad and anyone who dares to question the court's proceedings soon finds themselves hauled before it.

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Truett Felt and Ryan Quinn in *The Crucible*. Photo ©2019 Ashley Garrett

It's a chilling tale and the hysteria, the sheer panicked insanity that overcomes the people of the colony is captured very well by director Eric Tucker and his team. Truly, this is theater as it's meant to be, theater that engages the imagination with just a few props and inventive staging. John McDermott created the set design that makes a plus out of the Connelly's lack of a backstage or any other niceties found in most theaters.

A few desks and chairs and a bed frame are pushed this way and that to take us to the preacher's home, a public hearing, John Proctor's house, the outdoors, the place where prisoners are held before execution and so on. Truly it's almost magic. During a scene, the entire cast leaps into action and suddenly a judge on the stage floor is perched on a chair above a stack of tables, peering down at a witness with an awful intimidation. At other times, witnesses are suddenly perched precariously on chairs against the far wall -- they too are above the audience but their position is vulnerable and exposed, not imposing. Often this is accomplished in a babble of overlapping dialogue, heightening the tension of these unhinged times and keeping us off balance. Give two actors flashlights, turn off all the lights and suddenly John and Abigail are meeting in the dead of night for a confrontation which exposes them both as surely as those beams that stab out of the dark. Credit to lighting designer Les Dickert and costume designer Charlotte Palmer-Lane for their key contributions.

You won't find any agenda in this production, no artificial lens through which to view the play. It's just Arthur Miller's story delivered in all its complexity. And the cast is terrific, top to bottom. Ryan Quinn keeps John Proctor from being too self-righteous. Susannah Millonzi is his equal as Elizabeth, a woman who can be too easy to blame as a cold shrew. Millonzi shows an Elizabeth hard on herself most of all. Truett Felt has the tricky role of Abigail, managing to be hateful without ever playing the villain. Forgive me for not mentioning everyone, but they're all good. No one is trying to excuse or explain their characters. Paul Lazar's Judge Danforth is of course proud and

pompous, aghast by the suggestion he might have been fooled by little girls. Yet Lazar doesn't begin and end with this one idea so clearly suggested in the text. Like Abigail, he's scary in his determination, but no villain.

And full credit to the director Tucker who plays Rev. Hale. I always remember Hale as the real villain and I'm always happily surprised when this earnest man of God realizes the error of his ways and struggles to mitigate the damage. In the past, Tucker has sometimes seemed more focused on directing than his own performance. But here he gives a very good, nuanced turn that is creepily sincere at the start and fully human at the end. Even after he strongly doubts the claims of Abigail and the others, when they weep and wail and point to the spirits hovering over them, his Hale stares up earnestly, even removing his glasses to try and get a better look. It's funny but also shows this man's mind and heart is always open to the truth.

It's not quite perfect. As a show opens, the tendency is to sag a little. Here's hoping Tucker and the cast look to tighten things up. It's a three act play but on Broadway it ran two hours and 45 minutes. This one runs three hours and those fifteen minutes matter. A few moments could be shortened, especially the calm stretches. Better we feel ourselves hurtling towards the finale than ever catch our breath. And while the only score comes from whistling that underlines a few scenes, it's not effective when the show uses that whistling as a fade-out at the very end. They had their finale and should have plunged us right back into darkness, not let the moment fade away. Nonetheless, right now and at this length, *The Crucible* reminds you forcefully of what you love about theater in general and Bedlam in particular.

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[White Noise](#) ** 1/2

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