



SUNDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: Stuff and Nonsense for Friendly Crowds -- "Iolanthe" and "Panama Hattie"

**PANAMA HATTIE** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**YORK THEATRE COMPANY**

**IOLANTHE** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**NYGASP AT KAYE PLAYHOUSE AT HUNTER COLLEGE**



Sometimes a show isn't very good. Sometimes the performances are mostly...enthusiastic. Yet in the right context and with the right crowd, a fine time can be had.

First up: *Panama Hattie*, a (much) lesser Cole Porter vehicle for Ethel Merman from 1940. It's the final production of the York Theatre's season devoted to "mufti" performances of three Porter shows. That is, staged readings presented casually in street clothes so you can get a sense of what rarely seen shows are actually like.

It's been a good season. The musical *Fifty Million Frenchmen* has a superior score and clutch of songs they did right by. With a tightened (or new) book, you could put it on commercially. The revue *Decline and Fall...* is a signal work from the 1960s well worth revisiting. It could and perhaps should have extended -- no changes needed.

And now this military-loving, flag-waving bit of nonsense. It's not good and thus it's precisely the sort of show that *should* be presented in this way. The movie bears little resemblance to the play and ditched most of the songs. The original score has never been recorded. The stage version will never be revived commercially, so you won't see it any other way

So the York deserves plaudits for putting on this evening, giving people a chance to see the entire book (filled with romance, terrorism, American sailors, British butlers and so on), hear the modest score

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and get a sense of how rote Broadway could be two years before *Oklahoma!* upended everything but good.

With about five minutes of rehearsal time and script firmly in hand, the game cast offered it up. Under those circumstances, it's only kind to single out the pluses. As a kid who intimidates the Ethel Merman character, Kylie Kuioaka was a teensy bit cute. But what a pro! She knew her every line and probably knew everyone else's as well. Kuioaka might have left her script backstage for all she needed it. In ten years, she'll be directing. As the butler-besotted Florrie, Anita Welch had personality to spare and a strong voice.



Stephen Bogardus and Klea Blackhurst; photo by Russ Rowland  
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But it's an Ethel Merman vehicle and all that mattered was the lead. Klea Blackhurst (who knows from Merman) was more than up to the task. Without her on stage, staging *Panama Hattie* would felt more like exhuming it. But Blackhurst lifted the evening up. She belted out songs, she charmed everyone and when something went awry (like losing her place in a song or losing her bracelet when it flew into the audience), Blackhurst made the most of it. (My favorite line: when speaking about a villainous woman trying to scuttle her romance, Hattie says, "I'd like to see her surrounded by six silver handles.") Just like Merman all those years ago, Blackhurst took some hoary material and convinced us it was a treat to perform. The audience ate it up.

Then there's NYGASP, more properly known as the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players. For 45 years, they've kept the flame alive for the comic operettas of G&S. Sure, you and I might be able to name the Big Three (*The Pirates Of Penzance*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, *The Mikado*), but NYGASP and their enthusiastic audience can name them all, plus their

"Find Me"

THEATER: "The Sound Inside"  
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THEATER: "Scotland, PA" or,  
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THEATER: COLE PORTER  
REVUE "DECLINE AND  
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THEATER: "Terra Firma" Is On  
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THEATER: "The Glass  
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THEATER: Wrestling With  
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plots and the best numbers. Just try them.

I always pictured this troupe as a cross between amateur theatricals and a Met opera production of a war horse -- one of those very traditional and very familiar stagings the Met trots out with newer talent to get some ka-ching at the box office. And what do you know? That's precisely how it seemed to me. The staging is so faithful and traditional you'll think you've slipped back in time.

The large ensemble is filled with very enthusiastic performers and a few ringers in the lead roles. The set is spot-on and could have been lifted from *Topsy-Turvy*. The one shining exception is the large and very impressive orchestra, which is conducted by Albert Bergeret, the company's founder, artistic director and general manager. The musicianship would do Broadway proud. That aside, if you were stationed in India when the British Empire was in full force and the locals staged G&S, the vibe of this *Iolanthe* is exactly what you'd expect to see.

You get the strong feeling the audience is revisiting old friends, by which I mean G&S, *Iolanthe* and the actors on stage, all of whom are undoubtedly familiar to them over the years. That camaraderie and sense of people picking out their favorites extends to the main role of the Lord Chancellor, played by crowd favorite James Mills. He's played every role possible and when not on stage he's stage managing, handling tech and so on. Mills delivered up "Love, unrequited, robs me of my rest" with aplomb...all four times. Just to prove my ignorance, I only knew the song from Mandy Patinkin's solo debut, with not a clue where it came from.

Lifting up proceedings appreciably was Angela Christine Smith as the Fairy Queen and David Macaluso as the romantic lead Strephon. They excelled in both singing and acting, a rarity. But no cavils. Is it any surprise the Executive Director David Wannen both intro'd the show and popped into a small role as the strapping Private Willis? Not at all! (Even less so when you note he has some of the best credits beyond G&S.) Are veterans of NYGASP certain to shed a tear over Laurelyn Watson Chase, giving her final performance as the company's leading soprano? Of course they will.

Mounted for two nights only, *Iolanthe* and everything presented by NYGASP is a pure labor of love. That's true of anyone working in theater, but doubly so for G&S-ers. While London can boast of multiple companies devoted to their repertoire and at least the possibility of the occasional commercial production, here NYGASP is the only game in town. If, like me, you yearn to actually see these shows rather than just read about them, you'll come with a generous spirit. It's all stuff and nonsense. And sometimes that's exactly what you need.

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## THEATER OF 2019

Frankenstein: Under The Radar Fest at the Public \*\* 1/2  
Minor Character: Under The Radar Festival at the Public \*\*\*  
Ink: Under The Radar Festival at the Public \*\* 1/2  
Choir Boy \*\* 1/2  
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 \*\*\*  
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Scotland, PA \*\*  
Panama Hattie \*\*

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