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NYMF 2012 Roundup #2: Rio Dreams, Troubled Teens and Broken Vows in New Musicals

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This is the second in a series of roundups covering shows appearing in the [New York Musical Theatre Festival](#), or [NYMF](#). Every year I attend as many shows as I can and invariably see one or two that will rank among the best of the year, as well as discovering some new talented performers and behind the scenes artists

I'll want to keep an eye on in future productions. Go to the [NYMF](#) website for more info on inexpensive tickets.

RIO ** out of ****

TROUBLE: A NEW ROCK MUSICAL ** 1/2 out of ****

STEALING TIME ** out of ****

RIO **

THE THEATRE AT ST. CLEMENT'S

The real-life tragedy of street kids being gunned down (and no one really caring) is the starting off point for this Carnival-set retelling of *Oliver Twist*. Pipio (Nicholas Daniel Gonzalez) is the lost child who witnesses that terrible crime and becomes a pawn between the drug lords who run the slums and the corrupt cops who need to sort of clean it up while getting their cut of the action. Pipio is taken under the wing of the ambitious Pantera (J. Manuel Sanchez) who quickly realizes the value of the boy and takes him immediately to the king of the hill. Pipio is tossed about, from Pantera to the drug lord to the pretty Neves (Tanesha Ross), the girlfriend of the drug lord who is desired by Pantera but takes a shine to the little boy long enough to be distracted from the only thing that matters in her life: shining at Carnival. Deals and double dealing soon escalate, with drugs hidden on a float and Pipio traded back and forth as a chip in a high stakes game where the winner takes all. Will the boy find his long lost mother? He'll be lucky just to be alive in the morning.

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The book moves along and the music and lyrics by Mitch Magonet & Joey Miller have the feel of Rio, driving percussion and all. But only the bossa nova of "Dear Mr. G-d" feels genuine and not just pastiche. The choreography of Kate Dunn and Ron de Jesus shows more flair and director Scott Faris keeps things moving along, which is helpful since the Dickensian plot soon piles on coincidence on top of soap opera-like revelation with reckless abandon. Ross is quite pretty as Neves and when she doesn't force her voice into big notes has a pleasing quality. The show is naturally sexy but they're wise to keep Pantera with his shirt unbuttoned or off throughout virtually the entire show. Menace is lacking here but not the appeal of the attractive women up and down the line and Sanchez.

Dennis Kenney handles his dual role of Mafalda and Lulu with particular aplomb, along with his comic highpoint "A Lady," which is amusing though it comes too late in the story. Positioned towards the end, it jars with the increasing tension, whereas if it arrived earlier in the show it would be more fun. The scenic design by Colin McGurk does a good job on small means of capturing the spirit of the slums by using scraps of material to make the backdrops in a ramshackle but pleasing fashion.

Act Two begins with a rousing percussive solo, whereas during most of the show the music is outshone by the dancing. *Rio* strikes an appropriately nuanced ending that avoids a happy ever after. It's going to take a lot more work for the musical to reach that finale and a tough-minded approach to making more of the songs equal to the very best here will be a good place to start.

TROUBLE: A NEW ROCK MUSICAL ** 1/2 SIGNATURE THEATRE

Trouble warns you right upfront that there will be nudity and sexual content and by gosh, they deliver. Not since *Spring Awakening* (a show surely on the minds of everyone involved) has a musical offered so many attractive young actors in various stages of undress. Underwear is almost the most any of them can expect to don in romantic scenes and the Act One finale is shameless in its display of skin. Is anyone complaining? No they are not.

The story is the usual high school travails, with four couples coupling and uncoupling in one way or another during the course of a party and the aftermath the next day. Hannah (Abbe Tunison) and James (Davi Santos, looking like Jesse Metcalfe's younger brother) are the power couple. She's running for class president; he's running for vice president and everything is perfect until he dumps her. Hannah turns to baking for solace while James turns to old flame Sarah (Katie Mack), who knows she should resist his come-on but can't help herself. That frees up Hannah's step brother Ben (Wesley Tunison) to finally reveal his love for the high strung Hannah, which isn't that gross because a la *Clueless* they're not related by blood. Meanwhile, jock Chris (a strapping Matthew J. Riordan) doesn't mind so much having a cute gay stalker in Joe (the cute Daniel Quadrino), but what will his dudes think? The only couple that is together and belongs that way is the truly troubled Nick (Justin Stein) and Jen (Sara Kapner) who met in a mental institution and generally race each other to the next emotional breakdown. If they ever decide which one of them is needier and more fragile, it'll be progress.

In a way, almost every element of the show has promise, from the appealing cast to the songs (some of which really shine), the book (which can be quite fresh and clever) and especially the choreography by Jennifer Weber, which owes a nod to *Spring Awakening* but has some wonderful touches all its own.

The freshest storyline by far belongs to Hannah, the perfect girl who can't quite hold it together and feels she should be the first female President of the US but really longs to be Betty Crocker. Her story feels like a cross between *Clueless* and *Election* and should really be the focus of the show. As with many of the musicals reviewed here, *Trouble* is at its best when it isn't trying to be "serious" and important. Hannah's big comic numbers -- "Shake and Bake" and "Should We Just Be Friends" are hilarious high points, delivered with aplomb by Tanenbaum. Equally bright is the delightfully tuneful "Sitting In The Rain," which Tunison delivers charmingly on a ukulele. They all have in common a sense of fun and lack of pretentiousness -- not to mention strong melodies. In show after shows, the songs that are comic or light



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invariably also aren't afraid of strong melodies. There's a lesson in here folks, one that Sondheim (the composer so many think they're following in the footsteps of when they shy from catchy tunes) learned long ago.

The gay romance of Chris and Joe isn't exactly startling and comes a little jarring at the very beginning of the show. But Quadrino makes the most of his comic tune "I Stalk You A Little Bit" and the sparks fly pretty convincingly. Still, the smart Joe shouldn't be quite so clueless about a jock needing time before coming out to everyone else and it would be nice if this story would surprise us a little more by not following such a tried and true path. The caddish behavior of James is a little murkier. The show presents good reasons for him to dump the superficial Hannah and when he worries about commitment with the too eager Sarah, we're right there with him. But then it confuses the issue by making him a serial romantic with insincere needs. The crossed signals in his journey should be straightened out.

The weakest story by far is unfortunately the most melodramatic and the one that takes center stage in the second act. That's the emotionally rocky terrain of two mentally troubled teens who have a tendency towards suicide attempts, panic attacks and doomed ideas like running away together. Kapner and Stein actually have very nice chemistry, which comes across well in their first solo scene in an attic. But way too much high drama of the after school special variety is piled onto their laps and suddenly Jen is dressed like a hippie and the seemingly more stable Nick is hyperventilating and we just don't care what happens to them. The two actors are far too appealing to lose so don't cut this storyline completely. But by all means let the simple fact that Nick is moving away be all the drama they need to deal with. The rest is not worthy of them or a show that might create more excitement out of more mundane activities if it dialed back the high drama.

Again, Weber's choreography is a real asset, with a clever little dance involving people who are seated (very *Spring Awakening*) and a lot of fine work with the ensemble that is memorable. Director Michael Alvarez deals with the many changes in scene and mood with aplomb. And full points to scenic and costume designer John Dunnett who took one look at this attractive cast and realized sometimes less is more.

STEALING TIME **

PEARL THEATRE COMPANY ON 42ND ST.

This song cycle is the first presentation of a show about two married people who meet and fall in love. It's almost charming that the show notes think such a concept borders on the controversial. Married people having an affair and leaving their spouse for someone new and perhaps this being a good thing for almost all involved? Frankly, it would only be controversial if a show said that cheating on your spouse *wasn't* liberating.

The music and lyrics are by Tor Hyams and Lisa Neubauer. Hyams was at NYMF last year with *Greenwood* and this is a notable step forward. A number of songs rely on a sudden, unexpected ending for dramatic effect. But by and large they're stronger and more sophisticated. The only notable relapse into the psycho-therapeutic lyrics of *Greenwood* appear right near the finale when Maya sings that "I'm coming home to me!" Otherwise, the open-hearted "Wake Up" and "Out In the Open" may be self-consciously "big" numbers but they come close to delivering.

Still as with *Rio and Trouble*, the show is at its best when being light-hearted, such as the "Maybe, Maybe Not" (in which the two philandering couples detail their flaws to discourage romance) and the amusing "Dance Of Lies Tango." Andrew Redlawsk (one of the best things about *Greenwood*) also does nicely in his duet where the kids affected by divorce get to speak out.

The large cast of performers meant six different people tackled songs by both Ben and Maya. The tunes themselves may have blended together a bit but that was minimized by this decision to let numerous voices (such as Rachel York and Jeremy Kushner) add their own personalities to the parts. It might be that with just one actor in each part that the sameness of some of the songs might be more pronounced. At this stage, the projection design of Stephen Arnoczy was a notable asset, with visuals that worked nicely to accent the storyline and emotional turmoil of the characters. There is no question that *Stealing Time* is a step forward from *Greenwood*. Hyams and Neubauer don't quite fly away but they're learning to spread their wings.

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Cock ** 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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Trouble was an absolute mess that was only watchable because of the 3 female leads and Daniel Quadriño. The choreography served no purpose but to be distracting, the nudity was almost completely unnecessary and failed to add to the story, clearly only there to distract from the how troubled the show really was, and the staging was crass and amateurish.

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