



FRIDAY, AUGUST 09, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: more! More!! MORE!!! -- "Moulin Rouge" and "Bat Out Of Hell"

**MOULIN ROUGE!** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**AL HIRSCHFELD THEATRE**

**BAT OUT OF HELL** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**NEW YORK CITY CENTER**

Director Baz Luhrmann and composer Jim Steinman have at least one thing in common: they both believe excess is a wonderful place to start. If a scene in a film can go over the top, Luhrmann wonders, why not go over the top and then over THAT top? If a song can benefit from a choir, Steinman thinks, surely two choirs would be even better? Luhrmann wanted to create an original movie musical in the style of Bollywood. Steinman fought for decades to tell a rock and roll version of *Peter Pan* in full-on theatrical glory.

Both succeeded immensely, with Luhrmann directing the Oscar-winning smash film *Moulin Rouge!* and Steinman masterminding the massive selling Meat Loaf album *Bat Out Of Hell*. They can savor dream projects springing from those hits and playing now in New York, at least for the moment. But *Moulin Rouge!* the stage musical is an out-and-out smash that will make the film's success seem a mere appetizer. It's going to run for years. In contrast, *Bat Out Of Hell* comes to City Center battered and a little bowed -- after some offstage travails -- for a brief run and a shortened North American tour. Fans of both should be plenty pleased, but *Moulin Rouge!* is going to make a lot of new fans while *Bat Out Of Hell* must settle for the faithful.



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First, the hit. *Moulin Rouge!* was a successful film, I thought, but apparently it's a truly *beloved* film as well. Since day one of previews, this show has been playing like a monster hit AFTER the rave reviews came out, not like a musical with a movie tie-in and something to prove. Audiences are lined up, ready to have fun and the show is sending them away very happy. You want excess? *Moulin Rouge!* has it in spades, from the draped-in-sumptuous-red theater to the performers prowling the aisles and staring haughtily and sexily at one and all to the score that has been expanded from the film's already lengthy list of beloved pop classics to include a LOT more songs that have come out since the movie opened in 2001.

You might complain that the story is cobbled together from a thousand different references. But since that's the ENTIRE POINT of *Moulin Rouge!* your complaints will fall on deaf (or at least deafened) ears. Instead of Ewan McGregor as a young artist new to Paris, we have the charming Aaron Tveit. Instead of Nicole Kidman as the courtesan with a heart of gold who loves the young artist but must offer herself to a vicious nobleman to save the Moulin Rouge and all her friends from a life on the street, we have the steely, sexy Karen Olivo. And instead of Alan Cumming circa *Cabaret*, we have Dannny Burstein as our sleazy, don't-turn-your-back-on-him master of ceremonies. It's a fair trade and all three handle the heavy lifting they are called on to do with ease.

I don't really like the film *Moulin Rouge!* but the stage production has one huge advantage: no editing. Baz Luhrmann likes to edit his movies in a manic style that makes the typical MTV music video seem like an Ozu film. The stage show certainly isn't a shrinking violet when it comes to action (they pop the confetti right at the start and it keeps coming down for almost the entire show) yet it's not an assault on the senses. And like the film, all those new pop songs tossed into the mix are actually chosen with care. Those songs might provide a key phrase or line of dialogue; other times the performers sing a verse or chorus (though hearing an entire song is a rarity). But it's not just a medley of songs you know. Each tune serves a purpose, however passing or obvious. It's not until the curtain call and its *Mamma Mia*-like, legally required mini-pop concert that they deliver the radio dial-spinning mashup of song after song after song I feared all along. And by that point, who cares?

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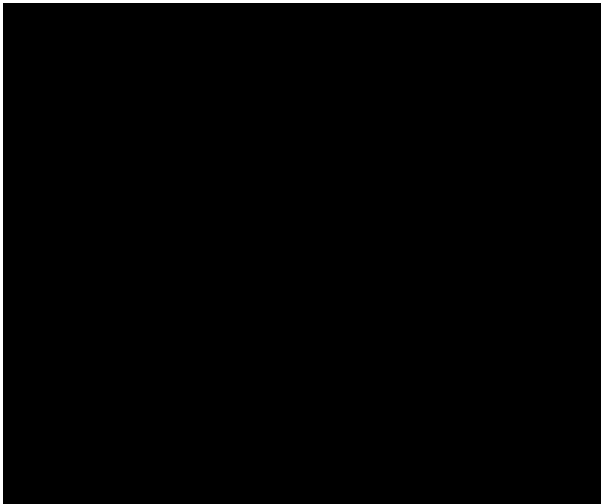
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It's all stuff and nonsense and it's done with professional zeal by a tireless, hardworking cast and a creative team on point from start to finish. Both shows would benefit from villains that are less villainous but a little moustache-twirling never hurt anyone. Like a hooker, *Moulin Rouge!* tantalizes and teases and implies you'll be getting the experience of a lifetime. But she's not your girlfriend and this isn't a romance. You get what you paid for and not a penny more. She's a pro and you're the mark and really, you have nothing to complain about. And yeah, when friends come to town and want to see a big hit show, you'll be back; you know you will. And she'll be waiting, a cool, distant smile on her face.



*Bat Out Of Hell* however is here for a limited time only before heading out on tour. If you're a fan of that classic Meat Loaf album or the Jim Steinman aesthetic of Phil Spector teen melodrama turned up to 11, by all means catch it. You'll hear some classic songs delivered with verve by a vocally terrific cast. You'll also see Steinman's long-gestating, post-apocalyptic spin on *Peter Pan*, more's the pity. In it, the city of Obsidian is floating out to sea, plagued by teens trapped in eternal youth by some nuclear winter fallout or something. The adults resent those restless, sexy, ready-to-rock kids and of course the kids resent those boring old adults because that's what kids do.

Raven, the daughter of a real estate mogul named Falco has fallen hard for Strat, the leader of the Lost (as in Lost Boys, natch). So when she sneaks away and...wait, what am I doing? Describing the plot? The plot is batshit crazy. The show is batshit crazy. The choreography is Jane Fonda-ish batshit crazy. The directing is batshit crazy, tossing in lots of video cameras to capture the action even though it's wildly unnecessary and distracting. The set is...well, not bad, with the high-rise home of our villain Falco suggesting the neck of an electric guitar quite nicely while the hangout of the teenage heroes is nestled at its base. The costumes are REALLY batshit crazy. (Apparently every apocalypse leads to people wearing football shoulder pads and a lot of fringe: see *Mad Max* and all its descendants.)

Who cares? It's *Bat Out Of Hell!* I am dorky enough to spot the artwork from Jim Steinman's solo album *Bad For Good* on Raven's bedroom wall. I know Jim Steinman's work very, very well, from Air Supply to the *Streets Of Fire* soundtrack to his early days at the Public Theatre right up to today. He's not a guilty pleasure, just a pleasure and his songs are enduring, bombastic fun. Which is why anyone who wants to sing along to tunes they love can turn off their brain and have a pretty good time.

I couldn't, not really, because these musical-worthy numbers deserve much better.

Pop songs have been reaching for operatic grandeur since the early days of Spector, Roy Orbison, Johnny Ray, Lesley Gore and all the rest. And Steinman knows his way around a show tune. But the post-apocalyptic setting he's had his heart set on undercuts the fun of seeing a kid's emotions explode into rock n roll. Set this story in suburbia rather than *Blade Runner* and these songs immediately work better. EVERYTHING is big when the world has collapsed, so the setting dwarfs the emotions. When you're stuck in high school and your friends and parents roll their eyes and indulge your puppy love and don't realize the feelings you feel are the biggest feelings anyone has ever felt (ever!), the only thing a teenager can do is burst into a big, big song.

"Paradise By The Dashboard Light" is a song about two people who got married too soon. In my mind, maybe because it was sung by Mr. Loaf and Ellen Foley, the couple is pretty young and haven't even paid off the bills for their honeymoon yet. And already they realize they've made a big mistake. Here it's performed by parents who are in their 40s or 50s, people who fell out of love a long, long time ago. High school wasn't yesterday; it was centuries ago. Bradley Dean and Tony winner Lena Hall sing the hell out of it, along with "What Part Of My Body Hurts The Most," another highlight (and a song that's new to me). Indeed, they're so good they practically steal the show from the kids. As with *Moulin Rouge!*, Dean is the villain here and the show would work better if he wasn't so nasty, so physically abusive and controlling of both his wife and daughter. Ah well, complexity is not the order of the day.

Other songs also work a charm, despite the absurd trappings of the story and the staging. (At one point, a guy roars in on a motorcycle, has an exchange and then angrily takes off...while carefully backing up his bike so he can get offstage without causing harm. Safety first!) The deep-voiced Danielle Steers and Tyrick Wiltez Jones turn the *Bat Out of Hell* hit single "Two Out Of Three Ain't Bad" from a kiss-off to a touching duet. "Making Love Out Of Nothing At All" -- the Air Supply hit -- also becomes a lovely number for both the teens and the parents. And I FINALLY made lyrical sense of "I Would Do Anything For Love (But I Won't Do That)" when it was performed by the happy couples at the finale pledging their all.

Andrew Polec is wide-eyed and strong-voiced as Strat and Christina Bennington is right there as Raven. She has a funny opening moment as a very bored teen who pours herself over the couch and onto the floor. Indeed, Bennington seems to spend half the show on her bed or sprawled on the floor and takes it all in stride, though she and Polec are helpless to overcome some of the godawful choreography and staging which sometimes has them prancing around the stage in a ludicrous manner. And ludicrous in this context is saying something.

But Dean and especially Hall almost make you wish the show was about the adults. The rest of the cast is also very strong vocally, with the strutting Will Branner such a standout in a small part that you know without looking he's the understudy for the lead role of Strat. Yeah, this is supposed to be a show, not a tribute concert, but if they just stood there and belted these songs out you'd have a lot of fun. And who the hell knows? The original album came out and caused no excitement. It wasn't until Meat Loaf toured the hell out of it that the audiences became bigger and radio airplay caught on and MTV started putting his songs on an endless loop late at night. I doubt lightning will strike again. This show always seemed to have a strictly British appeal in its staging a la the truly awful Queen musical *We Will Rock You*. But maybe they'll tour and word of mouth will spread and history will repeat itself.

Steinman has always been working in a theatrical context. His songs have reprises and natural breaks where you can fit in some dialogue and then dive back into the song. They can be *performed*, not just sung. "All Revved Up And No Place To Go" is a terrific scene-setter. The song "Bat Out Of Hell" is a gem of an act one closer. (Imagine if you'd heard it for the first time on stage in a musical, rather than as a familiar classic shoehorned into a show after all these years.)

Damn, this project could still be good. I'd do a TV movie with teens -- and make the setting painfully banal rather than the no-rules world of *The Walking Dead*. These songs would be their only emotional release, not a respite from trying to survive the end of the world. I'd tell Steinman that I love the song "Dead Ringer For Love" (Cher and Meat Loaf crush it on Loaf's second album) but it's actually not interesting dramatically speaking and should be cut. I'd point out that since Strat is the Peter Pan character, it doesn't make sense for Raven to sing most of "It's All Coming Back To Me Now." He's the one who forgets, he's the one who left and waited six months to come back, so that should be *his* song. I'd tell Steinman the vengeful Tink subplot is faithful to J.M. Barrie but just doesn't work here and besides, we're ditching the whole Peter Pan thing anyway. I'd tell him to either buy the rights to "Rock Me Amadeus" or call the dad something other than Falco. And then I'd ask Steinman to sign my cassette and CD and vinyl copies of *Bad For Good*.

## THEATER OF 2019

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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  
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POSTED BY MICHAEL GILTZ AT 12:07 AM 

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