



THE BLOG 03/29/2016 03:01 am ET | Updated Mar 29, 2017

Theater: Phylicia Rashad's Arms Long Enough To Box With God; Broadway By The Year A Knock Out



By Michael Giltz

HEAD OF PASSES ** 1/2 out of ****

BROADWAY BY THE YEAR: THE 1950s *** 1/2 out of ****

HEAD OF PASSES ** 1/2 out of ****

THE PUBLIC THEATER

Playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney is on the short list of great young talents that make it exciting to go to the theater. His innovative *The Brother/Sister Plays* was an impressively bold and sprawling work. *Choir Boy* enjoyed commercial punch. He's been the international writer in residence at the Royal Shakespeare Company. And plays like *Head Of Passes* have been championed by the vibrant regional scene, enjoying a production at Steppenwolf and elsewhere before arriving in New York City. Each work is distinctive, animated by intelligence and hungry to tackle big issues.

Nonetheless, *Head Of Passes* feels more like a first draft than a work honed by earlier mountings. It is messy, confused and has a verbal style that either the cast hasn't nailed down yet or which doesn't quite translate from the page. But you'd never confuse it with boring. No wonder McCraney attracts talent, with Tina Landau directing and actress Phylicia Rashad at the head of an excellent cast. The play remains flawed but they do it all the justice they can.

Rashad is Shelah, the elderly, perhaps even dowdy matriarch of her family. (It's hard to think of Rashad as dowdy but she pulls it off here until that dowdiness is replaced by rage at the end.) A widow living in an empty but impressive home at the "head of passes" (where the Mississippi meets the Gulf Of Mexico), Shelah is clearly coming to the end of her days. She wants to gather her children together and lay out her plans. Of course, those children have plans of their own. Financially successful Aubrey (Francoise Battiste) wants her to leave this ancient home in the middle of nowhere and move closer to him. The burly, room-dominating Spencer (a commanding J. Bernard Calloway) also wants their momma to move closer...to Aubrey, one of many amusing bits of humor the show is happily leavened with. And the drug-addicted Cookie (Alana Arenas) most definitely does not want to move back home with momma; a little cash wouldn't hurt though.

Also sticking their noses in where they don't belong are old friends Mae (Arnetia Walker), Doctor Anderson (Robert Joy) and the servants/almost family Creaker (John Earl Jelks) and his son Crier (Kyle Beltran).

While the dynamics on display are familiar, the cast is so strong, we go along with it waiting to see how the play might develop. Literally every actor makes a strong impression and McCraney deserves credit for creating characters and dialogue they could make a strong impression with. Still, it's hard to underestimate how Arenas elevates what might have been the cliched role of the messed-up sibling Cookie or how Beltran makes a confrontation with his father feel so powerful you start to wonder if his story may be where the play is headed.



(Phylicia Rashad and Kyle Beltran in *Head Of Passes*. Photo by Joan Marcus)

It turns out where the play is headed is -- essentially -- an act two devoted almost entirely to a monologue between Shelah and a God who doesn't respond. This isn't a spoiler as such, since Shelah is talking to God in one way or another throughout the show.

Suffice to say there is a mighty storm. It's been brewing since the first scene of the show, with rain leaking down from the ceiling and the water rising up from the ground. Add in enough tragedy to test the faith of even the stout-hearted and deeply religious Shelah and you've got a crisis of faith. That prompts Shelah's dark night of the soul where she rages and cajoles and confesses and demands and pleads with God, all to seemingly no avail.

So much of what needs discussing is wrapped up in the much shorter second act. Shelah's despair is made manifest by the home that is crumbling in around her. That's not a figure of speech. The house is literally falling down around her, the work of scenic designer G.W. Mercier that is both technically impressive (to a degree) and unquestionably wrong-minded. The literal fact of what is happening makes the beginning of act two rather absurd and impossible to accept. The home's destruction needed to be far more surreal so we could stop worrying about Shelah's physical safety and start worrying about her soul.

Numerous details become messed up in our minds, from what time of day it is to how long Shelah has been

left alone to exactly how it all happened. A more abstract production might have emphasized the fable-like nature of the story and freed us of those petty concerns. Instead, the set is so detailed, with floors sinking down and water bubbling up and pillars falling that it just becomes distracting. And it's not even that realistic, really. Clearly a massive undertaking given the space the play is presented, it's too fussily detailed to actually be believable.

The problems are not rooted solely in the scenic design. They're rooted in the play itself, which begins as a family drama and ends as Biblical parable. Specifically McCraney was inspired by the Book Of Job, one of the great poems in history. But the parallels fall apart almost immediately for me, at least, since a key element of that story is that Job is a righteous man who honors God and leads a good life. Here, in contrast, we are led to see all sorts of faults and regrets of Shelah that arguably have led to the disasters that have come to pass. (Not that they're her fault as such, but one can certainly see why she'd be wracked with guilt.) That's a far cry from the blameless Job, who the devil insists only worships God because he's never had any problems in life. Such is hardly the case for Shelah, however we judge her behavior.

A further problem is the distinctive rhythm McCraney seems to be going for here. Throughout the play, characters pivot mid-thought and go off on tangents or pause and start again in a confusing manner. It wasn't the marvelously arch approach of *The Brother/Sister Plays*. McCraney is going for something less meta here, not quite stylized a la Hal Hartley's movies (for example) but something more than natural. Unfortunately, whatever jazzy delivery he had in mind is not captured by the cast (though Rashad does best in this department). The result is not jarring exactly, but if the rest of the audience was like me, they found themselves subtly tripped up time and again in following what characters were saying and why.

To Rashad's credit, she holds our attention throughout that long final monologue. Her thoughts wander this way and that, with new information changing out attitude towards both Shelah and the other characters. Yet none of it quite adds up so we can understand the actual point of it all. Nevertheless, Rashad is good enough to make us believe we're always just a moment or two away from revelation.

To the playwright's credit, one can walk out of *Head Of Passes* and debate what it's about, something one wouldn't even bother with for most shows. Is it about a woman who realizes she is to blame (in part) for the bad things that have happened now in her life, that the chickens have come home to roost, as my guest imagined? Or as I saw it, does Shelah see pointless tragedy and lose her faith completely? What neither of us imagined was a Job-like struggle where an innocent person is bedeviled by tragedy and challenges God without losing their faith. Perhaps McCraney realized life is messier than a parable, that no one is ever as blameless and pure as Job. He knew the Book Of Shelah must close not with redemption but despair because sometimes flawed humanity is the only thing we can believe in.

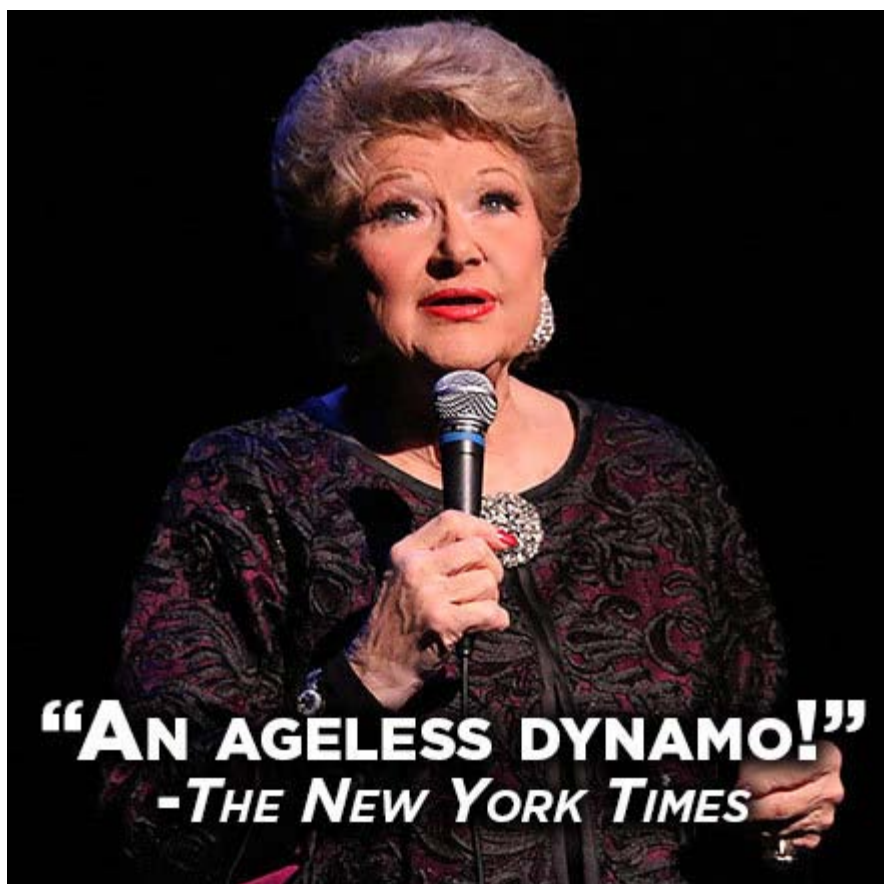
BROADWAY BY THE YEAR: THE 1950s * 1/2 out of ******

THE TOWN HALL

So the next Broadway By The Year event takes place at Town Hall in NYC on Monday May 23. Consider this an advance tease because every BBTY is dependably good to great. You get a clutch of big names, rising talent, and artists who can deliver and are known to theater and cabaret cognoscenti even though they're not household names. Throw in classic songs from the Great White Way, some solid hoofing and you've got yourself an evening.

Sounds easy, right? It's probably not but the show's guiding light Scott Siegel makes it look that way. The evening devoted to Broadway shows of the 1950s glided by and it was only later I looked at the set list and realized how strong it was. You come to expect no less.

Wisely, Siegel is always tweaking the formula. This season, they're inviting fewer performers and asking them to do three or four numbers rather than just one or two as in seasons past. Happily, that amounts to a mini-concert from legends like the great Marilyn Maye and cabaret star Karen Akers, as well as a chance for less familiar talent like Douglas Ladhier to prove themselves in various settings. Tonight was also pleasingly heavy on the hoofing. And literally everyone had a high point they could remember with pleasure.



I'll save the best for last and start with the end. Lisa Howard closed out the night with that war horse "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" from *The Sound Of Music*. I had almost no interest in hearing that song again (outside of the context of the movie, one of my favorites). Earlier in the evening Howard couldn't rouse any enthusiasm from me for "Never Never Land." But here she was delivering this tune without any frills and yet with all the power at her disposal. Damned if I didn't eat it up.

In contrast, the affable Jim Brochu won over both me and the entire audience, inspiring a sing-along on "Trouble" from *The Music Man* (a tongue-twister of a number he nailed) and a rousing "Heart" from *Damn Yankees* alongside a trio of ballplayers who harmonized amusingly. I'm now very sorry I missed Brochu in his award-winning turn as Zero Mostel in a one-man show. That points out one of the great elements of BBTY: you walk away with a list of talent to keep an eye out for.

Akers swanned her way through four numbers. While she's not quite my cabaret cup of tea, she's an undeniable pro and I was charmed most of all by "Love, Look Away," a duet with guitarist Sean Harkness.

What a fun combination of voice and instrument. Lo and behold, Scott Siegel immediately plugged his upcoming concert *Broadway By Guitar*, in which talent like Akers and Tom Wopat will all do songs accompanied by Harkness alone.

The benefit of performing several songs was clear when it came to Ladnier, a singer who somehow performed 11 (!) different roles in the Broadway musical *Jekyll & Hyde*, among many other credits. I mention that pretty awful Frank Wildhorn musical because Ladnier's default mode seemed to be of the earnest variety that fits Wildhorn to a t. It didn't help that his first song was the godawful "They Call The Wind Maria" from the godawful musical *Paint Your Wagon*. He was similarly emotive to a fault with "Stranger In Paradise." Ladnier has an impressive voice but I wasn't sure he knew what to do with it. But then he tackled the tricky, awfully quiet, even *subdued* number "Lazy Afternoon." The restraint of that jazzy little tune (given an excellent arrangement by pianist and musical director Ross Patterson) proved perfect for Ladnier, reining in his broader instincts and keeping the audience spellbound. (Heck, he even drew applause from drummer Jared Schonig.)

To solidify that glimpse of what Ladnier is capable of with the right song (and right direction), he duetted marvelously with Jill Paice. She had trilled her way through two songs, including a "Till There was You" my guest heartily championed during the intermission. (She's clearly gunning to steal away the role of Eliza from Laura Benanti in the next revival of *My Fair Lady*.) Together they performed "One Hand, One Heart" from *West Side Story*. That almost operatic number suited their voices while singing alongside a partner held Ladnier in check. The result was a marvelous moment.

Another highlight was the tap dancing, all of it choreographed by the performers who danced them. In one corner we had Luke Hawkins, boyishly handsome and spiffy in a vest. In the other corner, we had the repetitively named Jimmy James Sutherland, a dancer as rhythmic as his name and sporting a casual suit and a Jimmy Cagney swagger. Hawkins made the old-school belter Josh Grisetti seem like an after-thought on their singing and dancing duet "Very Soft Shoes" and sang and danced sensationally on his own to "Cool" from *West Side Story*. (Grisetti left his mark on act two opener "On The Street Where You Live.") Jimmy James played the boy-toy for Marilyn Maye on "Too Close For Comfort" with charm. And both fellas had a dance off to try and win the favors of Jill Paice, a duet that was explosively fun. I was leaning towards the playfulness of Hawkins rather than the cockiness of Jimmy James (I can't resist that name). But it was a close call and Paice wisely walked off with both of them.

That leaves Maye, a legend of cabaret who I first heard in person thanks to *Broadway By The Year* and an artist who has been criminally under-recorded in recent years. (If I won the lottery, I'd get her in a studio pronto.) Maye was on point almost all evening. She opened commandingly with "All Of You." She's reached that point of her career where the audience is already in her corner the moment she takes the stage but Maye proved that immediate affection was earned. Her medley of "It's Alright With Me" and "Too Close For Comfort" (in which she traded vocals in counterpoint to Jimmy James's tapping) was a pleasure.

And she ended the night with a lyrically precise, reassuring "Everything's Coming Up Roses." Maye skipped the first few lines in the second verse, though few would have noticed or cared. But she immediately said she needed to go back to the top and do it right. (Patterson nimbly kept the music flowing and brought it back to where she wanted.) Maye dove back in and ended triumphantly. Heck, if she'd faltered more the audience would have applauded all the louder. This talent rightly cherishes her distinction as Johnny Carson's favorite singer; he had great taste, after all, championing everyone from Maye to kd lang. What was so impressive here was how the song's intent and message remained crystal clear even with this small hiccup.

I'm eager to see her next show, a stand at Feinstein's 54 Below, which includes one performance April 10 and then an extended run May 10-20. It's sure to be a highlight of the year. That said, she had some flubs on lyrics the last time I saw her as well, all of them handled with charm and musical finesse that had the audience laughing with her all the way. I would urge Maye to make full use of technology, whether it's a prompter, an iPad with all the songs on them scrolling one after the other or plain old pieces of paper with each song typed out and easy to read. So many acts have employed them even early in their career (like Streisand) and certainly late in their career (like Sinatra). If it would help her, even as a tool she keeps on hand but rarely uses, why not? Her fans certainly wouldn't give a damn. Anything to allow Maye to deliver the best performance she can is fine by me. Still, let's not forget: one of the greatest moments in singing history involved Ella Fitzgerald drawing a blank on "Mack The Knife." The greats know whatever happens isn't an accident, it's an opportunity. And Maye proved that again tonight.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***
Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2
Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2
Skeleton Crew ***
Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before
The Grand Paradise ***
Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2
Something Rotten ***
Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2
Broadway & The Bard * 1/2
Prodigal Son **
A Bronx Tale: The Musical **
Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **
Nice Fish ***
Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***
Hughie **
Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2
Straight ** 1/2
Eclipsed ***
Red Speedo ***
The Royale ** 1/2
Boy ****
The Robber Bridegroom ***
Hold On To Me, Darling ***
Blackbird ** 1/2
Disaster! *
The Effect ** 1/2
Dry Powder ** 1/2
Head Of Passes ** 1/2
Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the founder and CEO of the forthcoming website BookFilter, a book lover's best friend. Trying to decide what to read next? Head to BookFilter! Need a smart and easy gift? Head to BookFilter? Wondering what new titles came out this week in your favorite categories, like cookbooks and mystery and more? Head to BookFilter! It's a website that lets you browse for books online the way you do in a physical bookstore, provides comprehensive info on new releases every week in every category and offers passionate personal recommendations every step of the way. It's like a fall book preview or holiday gift guide -- but every week in every category. He's also 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.

Note: *Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.*

Follow Michael Giltz on Twitter: www.twitter.com/michaelgiltz



Michael Giltz 

Freelance writer