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HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH *** out of ****
THE CRIPPLE OF INISHMAAN *** out of ****
THE GREAT IMMENSITY * 1/2 out of ****

HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH *** out of ****
BELASCO THEATRE

A Broadway house really makes no sense for the story of Hedwig. It doesn't matter.

Neil Patrick Harris impressed me immensely in Assassins, but he doesn't have a naturally commanding voice for rock and roll. It doesn't matter.

This same cast performing in an appropriate venue -- the dream would be a grungy club where the audience would stand and gawk feet away from the stage -- would make this experience instantly more electric and emotionally resonant. It doesn't matter.

Lavish costumes? Also hard to swallow for the has-been that never was named Hedwig. It doesn't matter. Entrance applause for a nobody coasting on her fifteen minutes of tabloid fame? It really doesn't matter.

Indeed, all logic goes out the window when Harris descends to the stage. He sings, he dances in high heels, he makes insider jokes with the dead-pan aplomb of a drag queen (though Hedwig, of course, is a transgender transatlantic refugee from love). He sweats, he acts, he plays to the crowd (but controls them effortlessly), he licks the stage, he gives lap dances and any concerns about plot cohesion or the merits of the theatrical version compared to the incomparable film (one of the best movie musicals of the past 20 years) or who the heck producers are gonna get to follow him once Harris moves on all disappear.

It's a four star performance in a production that is loads of fun even when it's nonsense and tossing in topical riffs and hitting the passages of exposition for this complicated story that are inevitable lulls until the next terrific song. It's a soon-to-be Tony winning performance (Sorry, Ramin! Sorry, Jefferson!) and after it was over my guest didn't want to hear a single word about any of my quibbles or concerns but just wanted to enjoy the glow of a star coming fully into his own as Broadway royalty.

The creatives involved clearly decided not to worry and just have fun. So director Michael Mayer has pulled out the stops in silliness, filling the stage with the set design for the just-closed faux production The Hurt Locker: The Musical. (Lucky critics even got a fake Playbill for that show that is witty in its own right; they should sell them in the lobby!) That quick shuttering (and an on-her-knees plea to the Schuberts) is the nominal reason why Hedwig is on Broadway while her erstwhile love Tommy Gnosis is in Times Square giving a massive concert to thousands of adoring fans.

Most will already know the story, but if you don't, well Hedwig was a boy named Hansel raised in East Germany

by his stern, unloving mother. He sings along to American radio hits while sticking his voice in the oven for the perfect echo. (And a nod to Sylvia Plath -- happy, he isn't). Hansel is eyed greedily by an American G.I. who is crazy about the lad and wants to take him back to America. But if they're going to get married, Hedwig will have to lose more than his innocence to pass the medical exam for a marriage certificate: a botched operation leads to just an "angry inch," but that's enough to get Hedwig a passport to freedom.

One year later, Hedwig is living in a trailer park, alone and unloved, watching the Berlin Wall come down, making his bitter sacrifice sadly ironic and unnecessary. Hedwig is babysitting and cashiering and covering pop songs in a seedy coffee house for the local military base rejects to ignore. But the teenage son of a general wanders and Hedwig's performance of her first original song blows the kid away. They become soul mates and Hedwig transforms him into Tommy Gnosis, shepherding Tommy's career and co-writing the songs for a smash debut album. Needless to say, success doesn't bring them closer together.

I saw the original stage production several times with different performers and naturally they each brought some new energy to the part of Hedwig. It's a disarmingly difficult role. Essentially, it seems like you just sing some kick-ass songs and deliver a monologue in between, a story filled with intentionally bad jokes and some awkward drama as Hedwig or his current love Yitzhak (a wonderful Lena Hall) opens the back stage door so the sounds of Tommy's latest triumph can taunt our protagonist.

In fact, some scenes involve the lead playing two or three different characters at a time, switching genders and emotions at the drop of a hat while never letting the audience see the gears shift from jokey to confessional to singing superstar. The defenses will slip, but we have to believe it's happening right then, for the first time.

Truly, it's a work that was splendidly transformed on film, all the inherent tricky difficulties becoming strengths as Hedwig was surrounded by other characters while the visual pizazz of the movie created the energy and excitement that rock and roll deserves but which Hedwig presumably couldn't afford for her one-night performance in a dingy theater.

Creators John Cameron Mitchell (book) and Stephen Trask (music and lyrics) have re-created this story back into a flashier stage vehicle. The witty set by Julian Crouch involves a blasted automobile in the middle of the stage, a useful obstacle that gives Hedwig and Itzhak a prop to climb over and around, giving director Mayer ways to provide more natural staging and dynamics than the typical bare set can allow.

The costumes by Arianne Phillips are fun and -- after the opening nod to David Bowie -- tawdry enough to be believable, even as they sort of dazzle, in a low-rent way. The wigs and make-up of Mike Potter are similarly tatty and fun, with excellent lighting from Kevin Adams, a challenging and convincing sound design by Tom O'Heir and terrific projection designs by Benjamin Pearcy for 59 Productions which are a stand-out (and not just on "The Origin Of Love," which one expected to shine). The stage band is crack with Hall nicely subservient as Yitzhak, though her strong voice never takes second place.

And then there are the songs. With all due respect to Mitchell's brilliant original conception, performance and genius work in the film, it's the songs that Trask wrote that make Hedwig and the Angry Inch worth revisiting theatrically even when Mitchell is not on stage. From the opener "Tear Me Down" through "The Origin Of Love," "Sugar Daddy," "Angry Inch," "Wig In A Box," and "Wicked Little Town," the songs are simply sensational. There's a modest drop, especially on the vague "Exquisite Corpse," but that just let's us catch our breath for the reprise of "Wicked Little Town" and the capper "Midnight Radio."

Hall is an excellent sidekick and sings beautifully on her own, providing backup, doing a quiet but hilarious turn on "I Will Always Love You" and making the most of the new number Trask wrote that's supposed to be the love theme from that Hurt Locker musical.

Harris commands attention from the second his feet appear floating down from the rafters and he acquits

himself well vocally. On the numbers where he's not a natural belter and that's called for, the orchestrations and careful blending of the other singers lift him up without ever (or rarely) overpowering his voice. It's support of the subtlest and most effective sort.

Where he needs no support is in commanding the stage, charming the crowd and in acting. Harris was especially good in some of those very complex group scenes he recreates, such as the growing understanding between Hedwig's mother and lover about the need for a sex change operation or the poignant, love-making gone awry scene between Hedwig and the freaked-out Tommy.

And all the hoop-jumping they went through to explain why Hedwig was in a Broadway house paid dividends at the climax where Hedwig imagines Tommy actually thanking her by singing "Wicked Little Town." Harris transforms into Tommy and is raised up on a platform that goes higher and higher into the sky, until we're all staring up worshipfully at Tommy, the perfect visual imagery for the life of celebrity that's just out of reach. When Hedwig comes back to earth and we realize it's all been a fantasy in his head and Hedwig launches into "Midnight Radio," it's a powerful, moving transition that was never possible to stage in quite this way ever before.

Oh, in general it makes no sense to be on Broadway and the new jokes are amusing but don't really add to the story and it drags a teensy bit and the platonic ideal of the film will always hover over any stage production (truly, you need to see the movie, pronto). But really, you don't want to miss Neil Patrick Harris.

Now, who next? Adam Lambert? He'd sing the hell out of it. Mitchell again, at some point surely. Constantine Maroulis, who deserves to be in a good Broadway show by now? John Gallagher? Darren Criss? Jared Leto? Kelly Clarkson? (Seriously.) The possibilities are endless. It's kind of head-spinning and I kvetch (how annoying to say it was better in that tiny little venue all those years ago). But, really, to imagine a long Broadway run for something as bold and odd as Hedwig and the Angry Inch is actually pretty wonderful.

THE CRIPPLE OF INISHMAAN *** out of **** CORT THEATRE

It's rather exciting to see Daniel Radcliffe grow into a skilled actor. To be fair, he certainly looked like Harry Potter, but those early films didn't display an obvious talent. But he worked at it and became better and better. Then he began tackling the stage. His Equus was rather stiff, though Radcliffe was not an ideal choice for a rough country lad (and the play is rather creaky). But it was experience and he clearly learned from it. His stint in How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying was close to a revelation. The show is ideal for stars who don't necessarily sing and dance with ease and Radcliffe ran with it, using his natural charm to win us over and really proving his bona fides.

Now here he is in a revival of Martin McDonagh's The Cripple Of Inishmaan, again using his appeal to excellent effect. Radcliffe is performing a tortuous, physically demanding part, allowing his intelligence to shine through and best of all choosing a role that allows him to be part of a strong ensemble. Add in some equally smart and challenging film roles and you're looking at an actor who is doing everything right. On-the-job experience has never looked so fun.

The play is a modest one with less grimness than usual for McDonagh, though that's not to say it's sweetness and light. The year is 1934 and the island of Inishmaan is all abuzz because a Hollywood film director (Robert Flaherty) is coming to Ireland to make a movie. Several young people decide to head on over to the set so they can be discovered and move to America and be rich and famous. When Cripple Billy (Radcliffe) asks to go along, they laugh. Why would anyone put Cripple Billy in a film?

Why indeed? He's an orphan, physically deformed and odd to boot (Books! The lad is always reading books!). His aunties -- actually two women who took him in after his parents died -- look after him with clucking, stifling concern and it's easy to see why anyone with a jot of intelligence might love these people but need to get away.

Cripple Billy -- who haplessly asks people to just call him Billy and if they don't listen, why should I? -- cajoles Babbybobby (an immediately appealing Padraic Delaney) to take him along and before you know it the kid has gone off to America for a screen test. If you think it's going to end happily with Cripple Billy a big star, well, you've never seen a Martin McDonagh play before.

The cast is solid and very funny but there's an inevitable feeling at times that the show is spinning its wheels with the comic set pieces. You could not ask for sharper performances from Gillian Hanna and Ingrid Craigie as the two aunts who take care of Cripple Billy. They fret and worry and battle with customers and each other and indeed, their every entrance is a sure-fire signal of some amusing banter.

The same is true when the town crier Johnnypateenmike (Pat Shortt) shows up. He's always got three bits of news, with the best bit saved for last, expecting an egg or other goodie as payment for his troubles. The same is true for Johnnypateenmike's drunken mother (June Watson), the Irish cliche of a liquor-crazed fool times ten.

The same is true when the teenage siblings Helen and Bartley (Sarah Greene and Conor MacNeil) show up. Helen is forever pelting everyone with eggs when not bawdily describing the priests who've copped a feel. Bartley is always pining for sweets. Greene is sexy and MacNeil quite funny -- especially when he's astonished after Cripple Billy suggests not taking pleasure in other's misfortunes.

That's a lot of vivid characters offering a lot of comic relief. But from what? Each takes their turn and is amusing and each is welcome when they appear, yet you do wonder when the story proper will start to take place.

Ultimately, we realize the suspense lies not in whether Cripple Billy will become the unlikeliest star in Hollywood history. In fact, the real drama of sorts lies in how and why exactly his parents died. (Everyone believes they killed themselves over their malformed child and tells Cripple Billy this every chance they get.) But while intriguing to hear, that's just information about people we've never met and not truly absorbing as more than gossip. Still, Radcliffe let's us see how this affects him quite movingly.

Another modest bit of suspense involves whether the willful Helen agrees to go out on a date with Cripple Billy (not to mention whether he'll have the courage to even ask). Actually, if you've seen other darker works by McDonagh, you're in luck because the suspense will surely be greater. A happy ending of any sort is far from a given.

Despite what it lacks in tension, The Cripple Of Inishmaan is indeed funny and given a faultless production by director Michael Grandage. All the tech elements are strong, with the sets of Christopher Oram (who also did the costumes) elegant in their simplicity and effectiveness. The cast is a genuine ensemble and the evening is surely as gripping and enjoyable as the play affords. And Radcliffe gets better and better.

The inevitable burst of violence at the end -- almost a McDonagh trademark -- is especially unearned here. A slap in the face or just a real sense of betrayal would have been far more powerful than what happens. But it's typical for a show that has the usually bitter McDonagh treading towards the uncertain territory of...well, not "happily ever after" but maybe "not so miserable ever after as one might expect."

NOTE: Radcliffe, however, needs his team to keep a closer watch on details. I suppose it was inevitable producers would create a poster showing Radcliffe in not one, not two but three different images with no other actors to be seen. But to have Grandage refer to him as "the inspirational Daniel Radcliffe" strikes the wrong note, however true. A simple "please, no" would have taken care of that. And then to have his photo alone on the top row of the cast head shots is the final tacky touch. We all know he's the marquee figure here, but it's still jarring. Radcliffe's a modest, delightful person in interviews and would surely be abashed and embarrassed by such things if he noticed them. But they shouldn't happen in the first place so he'd never have to step in.

THE GREAT IMMENSITY * 1/2 out of **** PUBLIC THEATER

The Civilians is one of the most dependably fascinating theater companies around right now. I look forward to all their shows in various stages of development (a reading at Joe's Pub, a rough assembly in Brooklyn, a polished stage debut down the road). Typically, they pick a topic like lost and found items or death and throw a wide net, interviewing numerous people with varying takes on the subject and then assemble this into an oral history/group portrait sort of work that is unique and engaging.

Here they've seemingly tossed all that out, tackling the subject of global warming via a fictional storyline larded with facts and even some musical numbers. It is disastrously wrong, but that's the sort of thing that happens when you try something new. They'll either figure out how to do this better or try something else next time. Either way, I'll be ready to see what they're doing. The Civilians remain a force to be reckoned with, even if I'm cool on this particular endeavor.

The story such as it is revolves around husband and wife Phyllis and Karl. Karl is a documentary filmmaker who won an Emmy for his work on the annual "Shark Week" shows. Recently, he was fired for turning in a new "Shark Week" hour that was depressing rather than exciting. Disillusioned, we now see Karl (Chris Sullivan) on an island in the Panama Canal where scientists study the habits of creatures and share their many, many fears about global warming.

Also on the island are a group of kids who will be representing their country at the upcoming global warming conference in Paris (taking place in 2015). Julie (Erin Wilhelmi) is the super earnest teen who badgers Karl into using his camera to interview her and help them come up with a way to reach the world.

Flash forward and Karl's wife Phyllis (Rebecca Hart) is on the island, desperately interviewing everyone in sight. Karl has disappeared and she's worried, naturally, about what happened to him. Is he depressed over his career misfortunes or radicalized about the dangers of global warming?

Interspersed among this "mystery" we happily get some songs about global warming. The central melody (introduced by Julie) is leaned on too heavily in reprises. But some of the other numbers are quite good, especially a tune about the various failed international summits of the past (like Kyoto), a catchy piece about the online collective Anonymous and a plaintive, funny number about the last carrier pigeon living in a zoo, soon to be extinct.

The problem is that most of the play revolves around the very uninteresting search for Karl. It's uninteresting because we know where Karl is and why. So you're hardly caught up in the mystery. He's been radicalized by the threat of global warming and is working with the teens who are cooking up some elaborate pr stunt to focus the world's attention.

Really, the only suspense is what exactly the teens have come up with. Will they set loose a polar bear in Paris? Will they allow one of themselves to be attacked by a desperate polar bear? The actual stunt is both more dramatic and -- while inconceivable on a practical level -- at least has the advantage of being a good hook for the media.

But who cares? We don't see Karl being radicalized, which is surely the dramatic heart of the tale. He seems burly and indifferent to what people tell him -- and what they tell him isn't anything someone even remotely concerned about the issue hasn't already heard, however alarming. If the teen Julie is meant to wake him up, we certainly don't see that, either. Maybe a sexual attraction might have added a spark of explanation and drama, however creepy. Or perhaps Karl's career crisis could be the trigger. None of that is tackled or even suggested. We see him looking frankly bored while interviewing Julie and the scientists and the next thing you know he's stowing away in the hold of a ship on a secret mission.

This is counterbalanced by the even less interesting story of Julie asking everyone what's happened, interrupted more often than not by scientists offering her facts and figures about global warming. As one modest example of

ludicrousness, when Julie thinks Karl is in the hold of a particular ship, she becomes frantic at the idea that the cops might find him first. No, she insists, she has to be the one to find him because he's too smart for them -- they'd never track him down. What, suddenly, this big, shambling bear of a guy is Jason Bourne?

The three actors playing these central characters dominate the stage but unfortunately have nothing of interest to do. The rest of the cast has a lot more fun playing multiple roles and they each shine at various points, all the more applause worthy since the story as a whole drags tremendously.

It was written and directed by Steve Cosson but the only elements worth celebrating are the songs by Michael Friedman. Global warming is a crisis and a crossroads for the world. This bump in the road for The Civilians is not a crisis, just the growing pains of a company that had a formula for creating works that they perhaps wisely wanted to shake up.

It didn't work, but who knows what it might lead to in the future? I'm willing to bet their talent will out. I'm a lot less willing to bet our future on hoping that the worldwide scientific consensus on the disastrous impact of global warming if we don't mend our ways is wrong. Unfortunately, The Great Immensity won't be a factor in changing anyone's mind.

THEATER OF 2014

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Beautiful: The Carole King Musical ***
Rodney King ***
Hard Times ** 1/2
Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead **
I Could Sav More *
The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner **
Machinal ***
Outside Mullingar ***
A Man's A Man * 1/2
The Tribute Artist ** 1/2
Transport **
Prince Igor at the Met **
The Bridges Of Madison County ** 1/2
Kung Fu (at Signature) **
Stage Kiss ***
Satchmo At The Waldorf ***
Antony and Cleopatra at the Public **
All The Way ** 1/2
The Open House (Will Eno at Signature) ** 1/2
Wozzeck (at Met w Deborah Voigt and Thomas Hampson and Simon O'Neill)
Hand To God ***
Tales From Red Vienna **
Appropriate (at Signature) *
Rocky * 1/2
Aladdin ***
Mothers And Sons **
Les Miserables *** 1/2
Breathing Time * 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Amaluna * 1/2
Heathers The Musical * 1/2
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