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"Oh, Hello" Sags, Mary Louise Park in The Weeds on "Heisenberg," Game Not Over For "The Dudleys," Non-Working "Holiday Inn"

10/17/2016 12:42 am ET | **Updated** Oct 17, 2016

And this is why some critics hate giving a rating to what they cover. Three of the following four shows get 2 1/2 stars out of 4 — and yet the first is a tad generous for a show that sags, the second is a very disappointing 2 1/2 stars since the original production was one of my favorites of 2015 and the third is a very encouraging 2 1/2 stars for a promising work by newcomers. So, you know, sometimes you have to actually read the review!

OH HELLO ** 1/2 out of ****

HEISENBERG ** 1/2 out of ****

THE DUDLEYS ** 1/2 out of ****

HOLIDAY INN * 1/2 out of ****

OH HELLO ** 1/2 out of ****

LYCEUM THEATRE

Two young actors dressing up as kvetchy old men (honorary female Jews, as all old men eventually become)? Bickering roommates, with one a struggling actor and the other a struggling writer? A not-so-odd couple since these friends actually are the only men alive who might put up with one another? Borscht Belt humor and affectionate riffs on theater? Yep, this is right up my alley.

Frankly, I spent the first twenty minutes of *Oh, Hello* wondering what the f*** this exactly was. I had somehow remained blissfully unaware of these alter egos for actors Nick Kroll and John Mulaney, who have both enjoyed sketch comedy success. I remained similarly clueless to their success when a version of this show enjoyed a lengthy run in 2015 downtown at the Cherry Lane Theatre. Now this routine inspired by two old men they spotted on the street and transplanted to a recurring sketch called “Too Much Tuna” has made the leap to Broadway.

And one must wonder, why? Perhaps it's being filmed for HBO or Comedy Central or that streaming whatever it is thingie, Netflix? Whatever the modest merits of *Oh, Hello*, those would certainly enjoy a much better showcase at Cherry Lane than on Broadway. I was blessed with excellent seats but it made no difference: this amusing schtick simply would have played better downtown. Gil Faizon and George St. Geegland live on the Upper West Side and Broadway adjacent is exactly where they belong.

Mildly directed by Alex Timbers, this is partly stand-up, partly sketch comedy, partly interview and partly a mess that sags and never feels purposeful, even in its rambling nature. They begin riffing for a very long time about the theater, making obvious jokes about leaving your cell phone on and crinkling your candy wrappers — it's the sort of stuff that somehow seems funnier when delivered by cranky old men. Even better are their loving send-ups of dramatic conventions. They act out clichés like explosive dialogue screamed at the top of your voice, one-sided phone conversations and endings that don't quite land. They even have fun by revealing a patchwork set design and laughing about a show that can exceed expectations simply by *having* a set. Believe me, I was with them.

Eventually, a modest conflict between these two roomies flares up, interspersed by a celebrity interview segment and other bits. It's mild stuff that barely justifies the 95 minute running time. They even had an interpretive dance augmented by the puppetry design of the brilliant Basil Twist. But it felt like a strain to fill up the space; far more amusing was the section that followed where they rested for a minute lying down on the stage and ordered an intern to fetch them things. It was essentially stand-up about local venues, but it worked.

What didn't work was a certain self-indulgence that had the show run 15 minutes over its running time. That's the sort of flabbiness that sets in during a long run, but *Oh, Hello* had just opened up a few days earlier! Improv can be awfully fun for those taking part but you want to make sure you're not having more fun than the audience. Even if it ended on time, I'm sure I'd have felt the same: I wish I'd said hello to this duo in the more welcoming space of a tiny theater in the Village.

HEISENBERG ** 1/2 out of ****

MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE

Theater is such a transitory, fragile thing and it can break your heart. The most indelible shows — even if they're filmed — essentially become nothing more than memory. And live performances will change from one night to the next, depending on the audience. I do want to see *Hamilton* again but the *Hamilton* on stage right now is not the *Hamilton* I saw in the spring. When you get a chance to actually see a show twice with the same cast, it's a rare treat...and also a danger. I was lucky enough to see *The Humans* Off Broadway and when it made the leap I chose not to see the transfer. It was simply too soon for me to enjoy the experience again. With *Heisenberg* — one of my favorite shows of 2015 — enough time had passed and I was eager to see how a play I had some modest reservations about would seem the second time around. Was it a mistake? I'm uncertain, but I do know that a second viewing shows I was a little too confident in the play itself. And I'm certain that moving it to Broadway, a bigger house and then desperately trying to maintain the staging of the original black box production doesn't work in the least.

The story is simple. An American woman (Mary-Louise Parker of *Weeds*) in London has just walked up behind a much older man she doesn't know (Denis Arndt) and kissed him on the back of the neck. She apologizes; he's dumbfounded; she apologizes again and keeps talking and you're not sure if she's a little distraught over the death of her husband or completely bonkers. When she tracks the man down to his butcher shop a week later, you decide she really is bonkers.

But this quiet, lonely man who goes for long walks can't help but be a little intrigued by this voluble live wire. They talk — or rather, she talks and he mostly listens — and go out for a bite and soon (inevitably?) make love. And then this weird creature turns into perhaps more of a con artist, maybe faking it all to scam this man. Or maybe she's making it all up as she goes along, as uncertain of her own motives as he must be. Who can tell?

The play is by Simon Stephens, a Tony winner for his adaptation of *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time*. I haven't seen some of his other work, but it now seems notable to me that the best part of *Curious Incident* (which greatly improved on the novel) was the production design and other elements that benefitted from the creative team that brought Stephens' work to life.

In this show, he makes a crucial reveal that spoils the play for me, turning it from a weird little piece that keeps you off kilter to a more conventional play where everything is "explained." Oh sure, one could argue about motives but for a play named after the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle — which says that you change something merely by observing it and thus must remain uncertain about its "true" nature (it's more complicated than that, naturally) — everything seems pretty certain here. Murky motivation is not the same as the more general sense that people are essentially unknowable.

Have I lost you completely? The play is peopled by two actors and a bare minimum of chairs and tables. Parker (whose memoir/novel *Dear Mr. You* is terrific, by the way) and Arndt are wonderful talents. But everything about the decision to move the show was a mistake. The quiet, quicksilver changes in mood worked a charm in the smaller original setting. The audience was seated in bleachers on both sides of the action in a blessedly small space and we could pay close attention to the subtlest shifts in mood. Parker and Arndt made the most of the setting to deliver craftsmanlike work of high precision.

The show tries to sort of recreate the production on Broadway to disastrous effect, with risers on stage allowing a hundred or so people to be right on top of the action and the rest of the audience seated in the theater like normal. Unfortunately, this means Arndt and especially Parker must play to that much bigger audience. Parker in particular is an excellent actress but here the fine detail work of her original take on the character is broadened and coarsened. With part of the audience perched on top of them and the rest stretching out into the dark, there's no way to give a performance that makes sense for everyone.

Perhaps only *Circle In the Square* and its round configuration would have made sense for this particular show. The need for a flexible Broadway house that can be reconfigured for each new work seems more and more

obvious, especially with the wave of environmental shows proving to be exactly the sort of long-running hits Broadway producers love. Is it possible a new house could be built to accommodate this? In any case, I fear a second viewing leaves one with little doubt that *Heisenberg* was a flawed play that worked best the first time around, especially when given a flawless production anchored by two excellent actors. They can't rescue it here.

THE DUDLEYS ** 1/2 out of ****

HERE

In *The Dudleys! A Family Game*, a man dubbed the Gamer returns home and deals with the inevitable emotions that can dredge up by playing a video game based on his childhood. By working his way through the various levels, he deals with his father's death, his mother's loss of faith and will to live, a younger brother who goes off the rails and a smart sister trapped in an abusive relationship. The set design uses projections to create a Nintendo/Atari-like world, songs are composed using sounds from classic video games and the Gamer sits mostly on the side, reacting to scenes and occasionally mashing his controller in an attempt to speed up the action or save a situation.

The conceit proves surprisingly rich. A family dinner is presented as a game where getting your siblings or folks to laugh scores you points while getting mopey loses points. When the two brothers visit their ailing dad, they must battle their way through rooms of sick patients depicted as zombies. If the younger brother meets a girl and goes on a spree of vandalism, smashing up mailboxes with a baseball bat scores even more points.

With the look of the show and the innovative score and its very approach to storytelling — just to name a few elements — *The Dudleys!* presented by Loading Dock Theatre has about seventeen bold ideas. Pretty much all of them are good, but sometimes the ideas cancel one another out, they're not always anchored to story and the rules of this game aren't clear. If they can be ruthless and dump the good ideas that don't help the story, root the plot in a much more concrete game milieu, set some clear rules and remember above all that the meta-ideas should be used to tell the story rather than using a story to come up with some nifty gimmicks, they'll deliver on all the promising work on display.

The driving creative force is Leegrid Stevens: he wrote the script/book, created the bold score and some catchy tunes and then co-directed with Jacob Titus. And the smarts on display in this show rife with potential drew more talent to him. Choreographer Melinda Rebman for example has fun with the Eighties music video vibe of the too few full-blown songs. But one must consider as a group the shoestring magic created by video designer Reid Farrington, scene designer Jonathan Cottle, lighting designer Simon Cleveland, sound designer Dana Haynes and eight video specialists and animators. Working together, they developed an impressive visual look for the show that employs such low tech solutions as having someone walk across the stage with a piece of cardboard while a “zombie” or other image is displayed on it to wall-filling stunners that depict convincing video game roadways and homes and the so on, all in their pixelated 8-bit glory.

They provide a fun framework for a game cast (pun intended) that sings, dances, acts and interacts opposite digital displays without ever calling undue attention to that fact. The two brothers are by far the richest roles with Erik Kochenberger as the handsome and successful Vic and Scott Thomas as the lost soul Derek both scoring some emotional points when given the chance. Marlowe Holden had less opportunity as their sister but shined when she briefly took center stage. The parents and neighbors were less successful since their parts were conceived in broader terms than the kids, though Steven Gridley stepped into the smaller part of Officer Peters on the night I saw it and deftly turned what might have been buffoonish comic relief into a real person.

But the structural problems are many and keep *The Dudleys!* from coming nowhere near the level it deserves. First, who is the Gamer (Karsten Otto) that comes into the show and plays the game? Based on the casting, I assumed it was grown up Derek, the sibling who seems most in need of working out issues from his youth. Instead, at the end it seemed to be Vic, though I may not even be right about that. In either case, it's deeply distracting to have this actor on stage for most of the show with little or nothing to do. Assuming he's one of the brothers (and if he's not, he should be), the roles should be played by the same actor. He should come in, take off his button down shirt and become his younger self when literally playing the game.

Halfway through the show, Derek pauses the action to talk to the audience. (When other characters talk, it's usually to explain a new level of the game.) That's a surprise. Wait, he can do that? If it can happen, it should happen earlier and only the one playing the game should be able to do it. Further, much fuss is made about Vic trying to act on the knowledge about his sister's abusive relationship before he “knows” about it. But that's one of the joys of playing a game repeatedly; you learn tricks and shortcuts and use any and all

knowledge you have to play the game better. So why the fuss?

Really, both the music and gaming conceit need to be strengthened. When the Gamer is working through a specific event in his childhood like family dinner or visiting his sick dad and that scene is modeled on classic gaming modes, the show works like a charm. Every scene should be conceived and played as a distinct gaming environment and if a level like family dinner is returned to, the Gamer should get better or at least do something notably different and for a clear emotional reason. (Sometimes you do sabotage a game just to mess with the system and see what happens, of course.) But the entire gaming concept is so haphazardly applied that the scoring that's occasionally displayed seems to have no consistent payoff that I could follow.

Scenes that don't follow a certain gaming logic feel out of place. The few full-on dance numbers/songs are strong enough to make you wish they didn't seem dropped in at random. (The idea of the show as a musical seems to have been considered but not followed through on.) And whatever you do, don't spell out the message of the show so bluntly at the end.

If they'd give us a hero literally playing the game, childhood traumas dealt with as classic shoot-em-ups and the like and actually "solved" in some way, songs cleverly interspersed and featuring more emotion rather than just settling for fun interludes and finally an actual *game* we can follow and root for a winner in, *The Dudleys!* will have every opportunity to turn all the hard work and smarts on display into a real winner.

HOLIDAY INN * 1/2 out of ****

ROUNABOUT THEATRE AT STUDIO 54

The movie *Holiday Inn* was such a big success, it launched a remake/sequel called *White Christmas*, named after the film's monumental hit single by Irving Berlin (arguably the biggest hit song of all time in terms of airplay and sales). So I guess it's no wonder this mishmash of song and dance has proven irresistible to the theater, even though it's pretty thin stuff as far as movie musicals are concerned. We've already seen the holiday themed stage show *White Christmas* come to Broadway twice and tour the country. Now here comes the original *Holiday Inn* and the results are just as tepid as ever.

The story remains very roughly the same. Two guys and a gal have a great cabaret act that's about to catch fire in 1946. Unfortunately, Jim (Bryce Pinkham) has had enough. All he wants to do is marry his partner Lila (Megan Sikora) and move to a farm he's buying in Connecticut. Weirdly, he decides this just when he, Lila and Ted (Corbin Bleu) land the biggest gig of their lives. Lila clearly isn't ready to give up the spotlight, so Jim reluctantly agrees to head to Connecticut on his own while she and Ted fulfill their contract. You can't leave Ted stranded after all, and this way Lila will bring in some much needed cash for their venture as newlyweds and farmers. Uh-huh. It's all very innocent on the part of Jim and Ted, though we can pretty much guess Lila isn't going to start weeding any time soon.

You know the rest. Lila won't give up showbiz and marries a rich Texan who promises to make her a star. Ted

keeps searching for a new dance partner since Hollywood wants him to make a screen test. And Jim can't make a go of farming. He hits on a clever idea: why not turn his farm into a showcase only open on the holidays? His showbiz friends can come to town during the holidays, perform new numbers he's written and pack the place to the rafters. (Only in the movies do show biz folk have their holidays free.) Throw in a local gal in Connecticut named Linda (Lora Lee Gayer) who used to dream of performing and has a soft spot for Jim and you know precisely where this one is headed.

Unfortunately, getting there isn't much fun. The cast is game but this is about as bland a conceit as one could imagine. It doesn't help that the film is filled with generic holiday tunes which — however good — rarely advance the plot or reveal character. We're spared most of them and the show tosses in a lot of other Irving Berlin songs (just like the movie did) but it has the anonymous feel of a jukebox musical. When Linda sings "Nothing More To Say," well it's a lovely song but since she's barely met Jim and they've hardly spoken two words to each other, the idea that they have nothing more to say or don't know how to express what they feel just seems wrong. And that's one of the better uses of a song!

The real problem is the drama-free book by Gordon Greenberg (who also directs) and Chad Hodge. We get three quarters of the way through the show before it sets up a very modest conflict: Jim and Ted competing for Linda as a dance partner (for Ted) or a partner in life (for Jim). It would have been dead easy to set up a "friendly" rivalry between the two men from the start, toss in a little backstory about Ted wooing away gals (intentionally or not) that Jim fancied or Ted putting career ahead of friendship --- something, *anything* to add a little drama.

Instead, the show unwittingly makes Jim the villain of the piece: he breaks up the trio just when they get their big break; he's the one who ignores the obvious fact that Lila is not going to be milking cows any time soon; he's the one who goes into debt and can't make a farm work; he's the one who lies to Ted and Linda, hiding from Ted the name of the woman Ted danced with to perfection one drunken night and hiding from Linda her one chance to live a dream of show biz success; he's the one who sabotages their performances whenever he can; and he's the one who is too cowardly to tell Linda how he feels and practically pushes her to Hollywood. And this is the guy we're supposed to root for? If you're wondering why the show is hard to get emotionally caught up in, it may be because our hero behaves either like a fool or a jerk and doesn't really know it.

Happily, the cast softens the edges of everything, making the book far more amiable and toothless than the actual details might imply. It's a trifle of a show, with Pinkham, Gayer and Bleu all doing their professional best. (Lee Wilkof also has fun as the handyman Danny and Sikora amuses as the Lesley Ann Warren-like Lila.) The set design by Anna Louizos is a little generic, with the costumes by Alejo Vietti seeming to nod more to the 1930s than the post-war setting of 1946.

Only two numbers by Denis Jones impress with their choreography: the gangs-all-here charmer "Shaking The Blues Away" with its Stroman-like inventiveness and Bleu's fun reenactment of Fred Astaire's patriotic dance with firecrackers routine in act two. Unfortunately, you could switch the order of most other numbers and hardly tell the difference. Despite the obvious fixes that would give the show some juice and streamline the story, here's hoping they don't bother. Sure, sometimes you can turn a bad movie into a good show, but why bother when you've already tried and failed twice?

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

The Crucible (w Ben Whishaw) ***

Bright Star **

She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***

Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***

RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2

Nathan The Wise ** 1/2

The Father **

American Psycho **

Waitress ** 1/2

Fully Committed ** 1/2

Long Day's Journey Into Night ***

A Streetcar Named Desire (w Gillian Anderson) ***

Tuck Everlasting **

War **

Paramour * 1/2

Troilus & Cressida (Shakespeare in the Park) ** 1/2

Cats (on Broadway, 2016 revival) **

The Encounter (Complicite on Broadway) **

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (at Two River Theater) ***

Oh, Hello ** 1/2

Heisenberg ** 1/2

*The Dudleys ** 1/2*

*Holiday Inn * 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. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.