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## Theater: Soggy "Little Mermaid," Musical Very "Far From Heaven," Blurry "Chalk Circle"

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**DISNEY'S THE LITTLE MERMAID \*\***

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**DISNEY'S THE LITTLE MERMAID \*\***

**PAPER MILL PLAYHOUSE**

Turning a classic animated film into a stage musical isn't easy, especially when the set is underwater and your stars include mermaids with fins, fish, crabs and seagulls. But *Little Mermaid* is the movie that pushed the Disney creative and commercial revival overdrive thanks to great animation and the songwriting team of Ashman and Menckman that would prove one of the best partnerships the musical ever had. It's easy to see why they brought it to Broadway: when you're starting with a handful of show-stoppers like "Under The Sea," "Kiss the Girl," "Poor Unfortunate Souls" and "Part Of Your World" the battle's half won, isn't it?

That version ran for two years but was generally found wanting compared to the film. It has been tweaked for Europe and high school productions and now it's been reworked and reimagined (or is that re-imagineered?) for this revival at Paper Mill Playhouse. They had a huge success with *Newsies* which went straight to a smash run on Broadway. Not this

The biggest challenge facing this story is how to bring to life undersea creatures. The stage production apparently relied heavily on wheelies (those shoes with wheels built into them so actors could float around the stage. Those are saved here for two minor characters. I think they've made the bizarre decision to have the actors...undulate while standing around to give the illusion of being fish and mermaids and so on. "Undulate" is about the only word I can describe this very distracting, even laughter-inducing choice. (I kept thinking of

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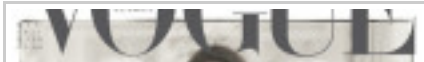
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Duffy swimming underwater as *The Man From Atlantis* in a cheesy 1970s drama.) G bless the poor actors who have to keep rolling their stomachs in and out while swaying to side and deliver their lines and/or burst into song. Surely a less literal choice would sufficed, even something as simple as a one foot high screen of "bubbles" or a literal aquarium of water with their lower legs obscured behind it to draw attention away from their feet. Clearly it's a key issue with the show and only a desperate willingness to do something, *anything* to create the illusion of underwater life convinced everyone that undulating was a good idea. It's simply impossible to take the show seriously when the undulating goes on the entire night.

Unfortunately, the problems don't end there for this show directed by Glenn Casale. The beloved version delivered by the film and recreated here is about Ariel, a mermaid enchanted with all things human. Her father King Triton hates all humans, believing them responsible for the death of his wife. Like teenagers everywhere, Ariel won't listen to her father and runs off to her aunt, the sea witch Ursula. She makes a pact with Ursula: Ursula gets Ariel's lovely singing voice and in return Ariel becomes human. The mermaid has 30 days to win the Prince and secure a kiss or she'll be doomed to torture forever. Joining



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**Jack Nicholson  
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the adventure is her friend Flounder (nursing a crush on Ariel) and the cranky crab Sebastian.

The film version contains seven songs and the first two are modest throwaways: "Fat Below" (sung by the petulant Prince who wants to be a sailor instead of becoming king) and "Daughters Of Triton." Those are followed by five gems, the four mentioned above and "Poissons." Very few musicals can boast five songs as witty and charming as these. Unfortunately, Menken and lyricist Glenn Slater needed to add a clutch of new songs to fit the 82 minute film into a 135 minute stage show. Each new song weighs down the score, obscuring the gems that shone so brightly in the film. They're not awful as such, but certainly not up to those standards and each so-so number makes it that much harder to enjoy the great songs when they arrive.

A similar lack of imagination is found throughout the tech elements, from the scenic design of Kenneth Foy to the costumes of Amy Clark & Mark Koss to the lighting of Charlie Morrison to the choreography of John MacInnis. One might have expected a production linked to Disney to be "no expenses spared," the way *Newsies* proved to be. But the overriding feel of this show is an essentially bare stage. And not a stage that's bare in the way a bare stage can encourage imagination. Just...bare.

When Ariel and the Prince dance and quickly fall in love, the choreography is notably lacking and the ballroom they're alone in is represented only by two cardboard chairs. An underwater scene with Ariel bemoaning her fate includes two actors in the background brandishing signs that include tacked on fish in an attempt to give the illusion of a school of fish swimming about. At another point, two actors are meant to be coral with perhaps some seaweed floating back and forth in the currents rising up from them. On the near empty stage, the effect looks awfully meagre. When they go for a big splashy number like "Under The Sea," the Mardi Gras-effect is both desperate and sorely lacking.

It reminds us how unique and special a great animated film can be. It's a very particular form. Look at "Kiss The Girl." In the film, this is a show-stopper of a number. Yes, it is great in any context but the clever animation puts it over the top. Ariel and the Prince are in a rowboat. Sebastian and all the creatures around them conspire to create a romantic scene. Percussion on the shells of turtles, frogs providing backup singing and so on - literally the entire world is amusingly working hard to get them to kiss. It's funny, sweet and romantic in the way lovers can imagine the universe is on their side. On stage? Sebastian is literally alone singing the song while the two would-be lovers sit in the boat.



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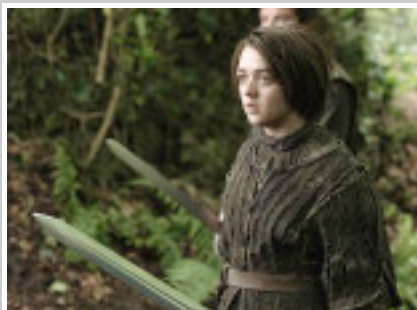
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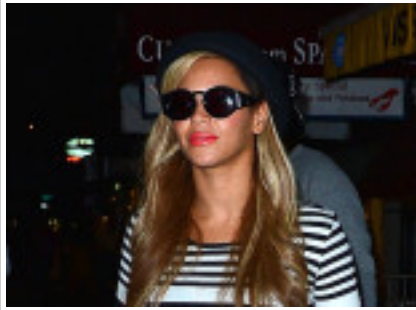
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Director Michael Greif, composer Scott Frankel and lyricist Michael Korie turned the unlikely source material of the documentary *Grey Gardens* into a memorable musical; with Richard Greenberg providing the book, they've tackled another unexpected project, taking the Todd Haynes film *Far From Heaven* and turning it into a musical. Led by O'Hara as the 1950s housewife whose life is turned upside down when her husband comes out as gay and her black gardener is the only one who understands her, it's an intelligent, well-intentioned show that never remotely comes to life.

The essential problem is that the marvelous film by Haynes is an homage to director Douglas Sirk. Every element of the film -- the cinematography, the costumes, the lighting, the production design, the style of acting -- is consciously created in the style of Sirk, not an imitation or a modern updating of Sirk, as such. Haynes simply set out to make the best damn Douglas Sirk film he could make, just as someone else might set out to make the best darn Western they could. The gay storyline is not meant to underline the "dated" concerns of Sirk or comment on that filmmaker or the times the movie is set in. It's just a plot Sirk didn't tackle that Haynes could, though specifically in the style and manner Sirk might have if he had the freedom. (Sirk certainly tackled social issues so it's very much in keeping with his sensibility.)

It's important to understand this when thinking about the film because it is very much a *film* and every element is geared towards the heightened reality and melodramatic sensibility Sirk embodied more than anyone else. It's soap opera and almost camp (I'm thinking of movies like *Written On The Wind* and *Magnificent Obsession*) but of the highest level, so elevated in its technical brilliance that it transcends the "woman's picture" label and the "female" issues Sirk happily explored to become art.

But if you take a Douglas Sirk film and put it on stage, you lose everything that makes it special. Without the lighting and editing and almost hyperreal cinematography and the technical aspects, you are left with only a melodrama minus the setting and particular environment that makes it meaningful. If you're not going to put Charles Busch in there, you better seriously rethink what you're doing.

*Far From Heaven* is a story of repression and right from the start we know they're not going to capture what made the film special. The set is dour and dark, with steel structures around to embody the staircase of a home or the office space or a seedy drinking hole -- they're like the bars of a prison, a cage in which everyone is trapped, whether it's Rachel Whitaker (O'Hara) in her loveless marriage or Frank Whitaker (Steven Pasquale) in his



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Wintaker (O'Hara) in her loveless marriage, Frank Wintaker (Steven Pasquale) in his homosexual desires and black people in a polite but racist middle class lily white Hartford, Connecticut. But those bars are too literal and downtown in their feel, far too specific and obvious for a Sirkian drama. Sirk (and Haynes) revelled in the lush worlds the middle upper class people live in; these are gilded cages. Haynes recreated the heightened world of melodrama where a glance at a gardener would seem dangerous and thrilling. Stripped of that context, the very context that gives it meaning and purpose and tension, the story seems tired and obvious.

O'Hara sings beautifully and delivers as always a wonderfully natural performance. She is not matched by her male leads: Pasquale as her husband is lost in a clichéd part while Dennis Johnson has to deal with both the neutered Raymond and the gravitas that Dennis Frawley brought so effortlessly to the same role in the film. Neither is a match for O'Hara vocally, though in fairness Pasquale is given particularly awkward melodic lines that often end in a thudding, low notes.

The story is not sung-through but it almost feels like it since so many numbers are on stage that the show is filled with songs that move the story along. Since this is a tale of repression, the songs are often about the things that are being repressed. The songs are often about the things that are being repressed.



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feelings and emotions, even that works against the show. When a character finally bursts into song, it should feel like a huge release. But every character bursts into song all the time. There's very little modulation either, so that when real emotions burst through you rarely anticipate or even hear a little more naturalistic passion rather than the polite chirpy suburban society. But it's too little and too similar to what came before.

Though the stage production has nothing in common with the film's look and technical elements (which is the very heart of the film -- indeed, *any* film but especially the work of David Byrne that Haynes is celebrating) it is slavishly faithful to every beat of the story. They strip away much and too little of their imagination, stripping away the glamour and style that made the film affecting and replacing it with elements that make the tale simply mundane, one of a closeted man and a loveless marriage and an almost romance that can't be

Certainly no new language is created to tell this story. When Cathy and the gardener Raymond (Isaiah Johnson) go to a bar on his side of town, the entire clientele stares at them and makes her feel uncomfortable. This should mirror what happens when they burst into each other at an art exhibit on an earlier night. Indeed, we're told by one character that everyone *was* staring at them and scandalized by their behavior. But until the end of the scene, nothing in the staging by Greif tells us this. In fact, for most of the scene the other actors have their backs to the two of them and they seem blissfully alone. In fact the better choice would be to let Cathy (and us) know the risk she is taking by merely talking with a black man in her world at that time or at least be unaware of the drama she's creating. In essence, their budding romance has no context and therefore no tension. They're also slowly developing an attachment as they discuss the art and sing together for the first time. There's no growing physical intimacy, no sense of sexual tension because they are already shoulder to shoulder from the start of the scene. Another lost opportunity.

One is tempted to say the show is filled with them. But since you leave *Far From Heaven* wondering what possessed them to turn it into a stage musical in the first place, it's more an unconvincing choice than a lost opportunity.

## **THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE \*\***

### **CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY**

Bertolt Brecht is a major figure in theater and like many people I've seen numerous versions of *Mother Courage*, *Galileo* and *The Threepenny Opera*. But this was my first chance to see *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, a show with numerous versions available, apparently in

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a framing story that is often dropped.

This time, the framing device is one that allows director Brian Kulick to lighten the mood. He has Russian actors speaking in their native tongue and apparently staging the play as the Soviet Union collapses. That lets them hang striking Soviet-era propaganda posters on a stage filled with ladders and bare lighting. The power goes out in the middle of the first act, letting the actors burst into grumpy Russian complaints while struggling to start up the lights again and plead with the audience for their indulgence.

The main story comes in two parts. In the first act, we meet a servant who rescues a child of aristocratic birth during an uprising in ancient Georgia, here called Grusinia. Grusha's servant (Elizabeth A. Davis) risks everything to protect the child: her future happiness, her love, her life when soldiers try to track the baby down and her honor when she marries a "dying" peasant to conceal the baby's identity. Sadly, she discovers the dying peasant is quite alive once the threat of war has passed and he soon cruelly demands his marriage. To make matters worse, the child's imperious mother (the peerless Mary Testa) returns to claim it only because the baby is her key to fortune and security. The servant insists the child is her own but her fate and the fate of the baby she loves is in the hands of a much more powerful new judge (Christopher Lloyd)

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The rather laborious second act takes a long time to establish how this new judge can hold his position. Finally the trial takes place. Until then, Lloyd seemed to be afraid that anything other than morose quiet would be too entertaining for a serious work by Brecht. But he's not playing the narrator (called The Singer even though Lloyd almost never sings). Lloyd finally comes to life as the oddball judge who dispenses his own brand of justice with aplomb.

The final trial -- involving a Socratic-like determination of the child's "real" mother -- is satisfying though it feels like the show was merely treading water for most of the second act before we got there. Throughout we have songs with lyrics by W.H. Auden and new ones composed by Duncan Sheik. His melodies have Sheik's distinctive mournful, twilight atmosphere well suited to the dimming of the Soviet experiment. No one is sorry to see the totalitarian state fall but they're certainly uneasy about what lies ahead and Sheik captures that uneasy moment well.

A few actors shine and no one is less than solid including Lloyd once he wakes up. Duncan is a solid, sympathetic lead. Testa is a delight in various roles. And the talented Jason Baer as a lawyer, a nephew and the hateful "dying" peasant among others makes a very strong impression in various parts. He was so dissimilar in certain roles I was surprised more actors didn't take the stage at the bow.

Despite the pleasures various actors bring and the music of Sheik, the evening as a whole felt a little dutiful. The framing device added humor but it also added length to the performance. (The mild audience participation moments were also time-wasters with little payoff, especially a scene where some are dragged on stage to people a wedding for no particular purpose and certainly no humorous benefit.) And much of act two felt unnecessary though I'm not certain whether it's Brecht or this production that should be held accountable. It's the feeling you sometimes get in your youth when seeing certain Shakespeare plays for the first time. Is it one of the weaker ones (*Titus Andronicus*) or a weaker production of a good show (*The Winter's Tale*)? I won't be sure about *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* until I see it again.

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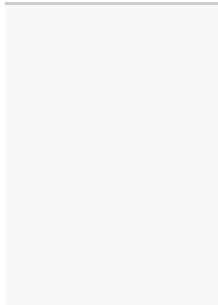
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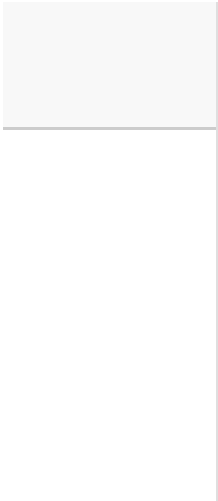
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