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Theater: *Once Upon* a Fairy Tale; *Color Purple* Glows And The Best Of 2015

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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

ONCE UPON A MATTRESS ** 1/2 out of ****
ABRON ARTS CENTER

THE COLOR PURPLE ** 1/2 out of ****
BERNARD B. JACOBS THEATRE

Both of these musicals have a lot in common. Both are pretty weak, with *Purple* especially weak in the score and *Mattress* weak in the book. But both are elevated by outstanding casts. We'll probably never see a better production of *The Color Purple*; this one is so good it almost tricks you into thinking the show itself is worthwhile. *Mattress* can be harmless fun with the right pros on board and the right attitude -- Transport Group's production happily has both.

First, the little show that could. *Once Upon A Mattress* was a memorable success for composer Mary Rodgers. It takes the old fairy tale of "The Princess And The Pea" and expands that into pleasing entertainment. The show is so old school you might believe it's winkingly retro rather than just traditional down to its toes.

Genially overstuffed, it has a solo showcase for a hoofer (a fleet, fit Cory Lingner), some silent clowning (David Greenspan), a star-crossed subplot (a handsome Zak Resnick and the pretty, strong-voiced Jessica Fontana), comic nonsense (Jay Rogers as the Wizard) and eye candy (Hunter Ryan Herdlicka). In short, something for everyone.

Happily, director Jack Cummings III, a game cast and a robust 12-strong orchestra (!) conducted by Matt Castle with excellent orchestrations by Castle and Frank Galgano have exactly the right take on this hoary chestnut.

They turn a modest budget into a virtue by drawing attention to the scenic illustrations of Ken Fallin, which are literally drawn for each scene while we watch. Once Upon A Mattress needs characters, actors who don't fit neatly into an ensemble (an attribute that's a dying art in a world where every school expects every student to be a bland triple threat). It's got 'em. John Epperson aka Lypsinka is a delight as the wicked Queen. How marvelous to realize an actor known for not speaking in fact has a formidable vocal instrument. (It's also clever of them to have Goodman, a pioneering artist in his own right and known for his vocal acrobatics playing essentially a mute.) Herdlicka, whose name must have been a field day for his fellow cast members, proves far more versatile than one might have expected from his handsome demeanor. (This isn't a show for lookers, darn it!) As the Minstrel, he showed off the best voice of the night and charm to spare, acting with aplomb while blending in with the ensemble as needed. When Aladdin needs a new title actor, Herdlicka could fill the role nicely.

Above all, it has the great pleasure of Jackie Hoffman as Princess Winifred, the strong-willed gal made famous by Carol Burnett. Being a princess of a certain age adds a poignant sweetness to Winifred that Hoffman mines easily. *Once Upon A Mattress* isn't much when all is said and done, but when a talented ensemble is having this much fun, you're sure to do so as well.

Similarly, *The Color Purple* is blessed by an excellent cast. The film version by Steven Spielberg was elevated by Oprah Winfrey, Danny Glover and Whoopi Goldberg in a star-making turn. Guess what? The stage musical is elevated by Oscar winner Jennifer Hudson, Danielle Brooks of *Orange Is The New Black*, Kyle Scatliffe as Harpo and Cynthia

Erivo in a star-making turn as Celie.

They're all very lucky to be in a production overseen with elegant simplicity by director John Doyle. I didn't see the original, but by all accounts it was a glossy, spare-no-expense production. (It makes sense, since the movie was also glossy, emphasizing the fairy tale quality of the redemption close at hand in Alice Walker's novel.) Here instead of "spare no expense" we have simply "spare," courtesy of Doyle's set design, which features fractured wooden screens and a whole lot of chairs. Place them in rows and you've got a church. Have men lift up chairs and "plow" the stage with the legs and you've got a field. Women carrying baskets on their hips are in America. Simply lift them up above their heads and suddenly you believe we're in Africa. It's theatrical imagination at its best.

The show needs it. The blunt story finds the beaten down Celie (Erivo) facing one nightmare after another in Act One: molestation by her father, children ripped out of her arms, an abusive husband and a sister she is cruelly led to believe died long ago. Act two becomes just as abruptly happy, with Celie finding self-esteem and business savvy with a needle and thread, not to mention the humanity to forgive and even befriend the cruel men in her life. The herky jerky book is by Marsha Norman and Brenda Russell and the unmemorable music and lyrics are by Allee Willis and Stephen Bray. (Frankly, Spielberg's movie overseen musically by Quincy Jones has better musical numbers even though it's nominally a drama.)

If you're choosing between the film and the stage musical, I'd still send you to Walker's original novel, whose memorable voice of Celie as narrator overcomes all complaints about plot and character. But if you've got the chance, by all means rush out to see the original cast in this revival. Jennifer Hudson isn't much of a stage actress (yet) and her big

songs -- especially the rote juke joint romp "Push Da Button" -- are forgettable. But she's got presence and a marvelous voice to spin them into something vivid.

Brooks has the indomitable Sophie to assay and makes the most of a character with very little subtlety. Paired with her is Scatliffe as the sweet-natured Harpo. And the entire cast is committed wholly to the life-affirming material, from the church lady Greek chorus to the many supporting roles. (Isaiah Johnson is not as forbidding as Mister should be nor as believably redemptive as Glover managed in the film.)

Absolutely none of this matters (much) when Cynthia Erivo is holding your attention. Since Celie is the center of the entire show, that's naturally most of the evening. And she's a delight. Her performance to my mind was just a tiny bit one-note, with the stage not allowing her to bring the subtlety to abrupt one word line readings that Goldberg nailed in the movie.

On the other hand, the material *is* awfully thin. And she brings it to life with a marvelous winning presence and a voice that is huge yet never showing off. The audience roared its approval when this slowly blossoming character belted out her defiance and no wonder. I've no desire to see *The Color Purple* ever again. But I can't wait to see Erivo in something new. Given the reaction of the crowd I saw it with, that's going to be quite a while. I'm confident it will be worth the wait.

THE BEST THEATER OF 2015

- 1. Hamilton
- 2. Daniel Kitson's Christmas Show
- 3. What You Will aka Twelth Night by Bedlam
- 4. The Humans
- 5. Spring Awakening (w Deaf Theatre West)
- 6. Heisenberg
- 7. and 8. On The Twentieth Century

The King And I

- 9. King Charles III
- 10. John -- the Annie Baker show at Signature/ The Painted Rocks At Revolver Creek -- Athol Fugard show at Signature

11. The Woodsman

THEATER OF 2015

Doctor Zhivago no stars

Honeymoon In Vegas ** The Woodsman *** Constellations ** 1/2 Taylor Mac's A 24 Decade History Of Popular Music 1930s-1950s ** 1/2 Let The Right One In ** <u>Da</u> no rating A Month In The Country ** 1/2 Parade in Concert at Lincoln Center ** 1/2 Hamilton at the Public *** The World Of Extreme Happiness ** 1/2 Broadway By The Year 1915-1940 ** **Verite** * 1/2 Fabulous! * The Mystery Of Love & Sex ** An Octoroon at Polonsky Shakespeare Center *** 1/2 Fish In The Dark * The Audience *** Josephine And I *** Posterity * 1/2 The Hunchback Of Notre Dame ** Lonesome Traveler ** On The Twentieth Century *** Radio City Music Hall's New York Spring Spectacular ** 1/2 The Heidi Chronicles * The Tallest Tree In The Forest * 1/2 Broadway By The Year: 1941-1965 *** Twelfth Night by Bedlam *** What You Will by Bedlam *** 1/2 Wolf Hall Parts I and II ** 1/2 Skylight *** Nellie McKay at 54 Below *** Ludic Proxv ** 1/2 It Shoulda Been You ** Finding Neverland ** 1/2 Hamlet w Peter Sarsgaard at CSC no stars The King And I *** Marilyn Maye -- Her Way: A Tribute To Frank Sinatra at 54 Below *** Gigi * 1/2 An American In Paris ** 1/2

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Fun Home **
Living On Love * 1/2
Early Shaker Spirituals: A Record Album Interpretation ***
Airline Highway * 1/2
The Two Gentlemen Of Verona (Fiasco Theatre) ***
The Visit (w Chita Rivera) ** 1/2
The Sound And The Fury (ERS) **
Broadway By The Year: 1966-1990 ***
The Spoils * 1/2
Ever After (at Papermill) **
Heisenberg *** 1/2
An Act Of God **
The National High School Musical Theatre Awards ***
Amazing Grace *
The Absolute Brightness Of Leonard Pelkey ** 1/2
Cymbeline (Shakespeare in the Park w Rabe and Linklater) ***
<u>Hamilton</u> *** 1/2
The Christians ***
A Midsummer Night's Dream (Pearl Theatre Company) ** 1/2
Spring Awakening (w Deaf Theatre West) *** 1/2
Daddy Long Legs **
Reread Another **
Fool For Love (w Nina Arianda and Sam Rockwell) ** 1/2
Barbecue (at Public) **
Old Times (w Clive Owen) **
The Bandstand ***
The Gin Game **
Rothschild & Sons ** 1/2
The Inn At Lake Devine **
First Daughter Suite ** 1/2
The Humans *** 1/2
Svlvia **
Dames At Sea ** 1/2
Ripcord **
Hir **
Thér se Raquin *
King Charles III *** 1/2
Henry IV (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) ***
On Your Feet **
Misery * out of ****
A View From The Bridge *** out of ****
Allegiance ** 1/2 out of ****
China Doll *
School Of Rock * 1/2
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New York Animals ** 1/2
The New Standards Holiday Show ***
Marjorie Prime **
Lazarus * 1/2
Plaid Tidings ** 1/2
Once Upon A Mattress ** 1/2
The Color Purple ** 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.

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CONVERSATIONS