

Theater: Linda Lavin Gets 'Too Much Sun;' 'Broadway By The Year' Shines Yet Again

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TOO MUCH SUN * 1/2 out of ****

BROADWAY BY THE YEAR 1965-1989 *** out of ****

IN THE PARK ** out of ****

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VINEYARD THEATRE

Playwright Nicky Silver follows up his solid, Broadway comic drama *The Lyons* with this indifferently written, indifferently directed and (for the most part) indifferently acted comic-drama that feels tossed off and artificial.

All plays are just stories, of course. Some revel in artificiality. Others become so real you experience them. Sometimes, unfortunately, you just don't buy it. The plot twists are both obvious and unconvincing. So it is with this tale of a summer at a beach house. Silver's muse Linda Lavin (you couldn't ask for a better one) is Audrey Langham, a theater actress of a certain reputation. She gets fed up with it all during a desultory production of *Medea* and appears on the doorstep of her much-ignored daughter Kitty (Jennifer Westfeldt). Kitty and her husband Dennis (Ken Barnett) are distraught, to say the least, especially when they discover not only does Audrey not want to leave anytime soon, she can't leave anytime soon: Audrey is flat broke and has "lost" her home.

Toss in a wealthy widowed neighbor named Winston (Richard Bekins); his chipper, pot-dealing gay son Lucas (Matt Dickson); and an agent's assistant (Matt Dellapina) begging Audrey to return to work but really only interested in becoming a rabbi and you've got yourself a recipe for hi-jinks. Sort of.

Let's begin with Kitty's husband Dennis, who is an ad exec but longs to write a novel, or more specifically longs to be the sort of guy who has already written a novel. (The actual work doesn't interest him in the least.) Is their marriage a happy one? Does he really want to be a novelist? Does he hate his job? We can spot a mile away the fact that Dennis and the handsome, playful teenager on his way to college Lucas will have sex. But this has surprisingly little impact. Is Dennis gay? Bisexual? Was he just looking for a little action? Experimenting? Does this mean the end of his marriage? Does he care? Do we care?

I have only questions about this and virtually every other banal plot twist because they feel so random, so meaningless. When Lucas says he enjoys sci-fi (the genre Dennis is nominally writing in), the man is astonished. Why? (Lucas' favorites, by the way, are favorites of mine too but feel completely out of date for a kid of today.) The agent's assistant says he wants to be a rabbi, but knows virtually nothing about the Jewish faith and expresses no interest in learning. Why? Is it just humorous? Does it reflect some superficiality? I've no idea what any of it means and can't care in the least since none of the characters go much beyond a type that is given one consuming idea -- pot, rabbi, novel, India -- and then left at that. At the finale, they all recap what's happened to them after the play ends but we truly don't care.

Director Mark Brokaw brings nothing to the proceedings, stranding actors on stage for long periods of time (Dennis in particular must sit there musing on his potential novel for no reason whatsoever while another scene

continues on in the background; Lucas must do the same and it's for the worst twist of the night -- I wouldn't have bought this kid blowing off college, much less the far more drastic step he takes). The tone for the most of the cast is slightly heightened and manic. At least something might have been gleaned from a more naturalistic style. Everyone is delivering their lines loudly, as if speaking over the laugh track to come.

The exceptions? Lavin and her romantic love interest Bekins. Lavin is always centered and calm and funny, despite playing a woman of the theater desperate for a last chance at stability. Her scenes with Bekins are a rare oasis of believability and feeling. One could listen to her sing to him all night long. But unfortunately, antics ensue.

Silver is lucky to have Lavin in his life and surely he will give her a more substantial work again soon. But how telling it is to think back on her part here to see how misguided this rough draft of a play truly is. Lavin's character -- a theatrical force of nature who has dominated her daughter with her absence -- doesn't change in the least. Just as tellingly, she doesn't swoop in and affect change on anyone else either. Her presence is beside the point when it comes to her son-in-law's sexual revelation and all the other twists and turns that occur. Something is very wrong when the lead character is incidental to most of the plot.

BROADWAY BY THE YEAR 1965-1989 * out of ****** **TOWN HALL**

Broadway By The Year is firing on all cylinders as it celebrates 100 years of musical theater with its biggest series yet. They're tackling 25 years a night and [the finale at Town Hall on June 23](#) promises to be just as satisfying as the previous nights. The chance to catch big theater and cabaret stars, rising talent and legends recreating some of their most iconic moments is not to be missed. If that isn't a plug, I don't know what is, but it deserves it.

Broadway By The Year is the centerpiece event of a growing stable of shows overseen by [Scott Siegel](#), like [Broadway Rising Stars on July 14](#), his annual showcase of the best talent coming out of musical theater programs.

The concert covering 1965-1989 didn't scale the heights of the previous edition, but that evening got to dive into the greatest era in Broadway history. The fascinating part of this night was to hear Broadway evolve (or perhaps devolve to a degree). Big shows always had big numbers, but they seemed to be turning into self-conscious "big" numbers during the 1970s and 1980s, the era of the blockbuster musical such as *Cats* and *Les Misérables*. Whatever their individual qualities, these songs feel more American Idol ready than the ones from the 1940s-1960s.

Annie Golden is having fun on Broadway right now in *Violet*, but it was fun to see her recreate "Frank Mills" from *Hair*. And Lee Roy Reams famously lost out on the chance to play *La Cage Aux Folles* on Broadway when he left his cushiony role in *42nd Street* for the chance, only to have producers cancel the transfer and his starring role literally at the last minute. (He did take it on the road.) So it was sweet vindication to have him perform "I Am What I Am" now. And the Broadway By The Year chorus vindicated themselves after a sloppy turn last time around, with their rendition of the haunting "Sunday" from *Sunday In The Park With George*.

But a handful of highlights really stood out. Quentin Earl Darrington flew in (from Chicago, I think) just to perform "Nobody," a famed comic number by the great Bert Williams. He was magnetic, funny and in great voice, holding the audience in the palm of his hand. Adriane Lenox also wowed them with her striding, no-holds rendition of "Keeping Out Of Mischief Now" from *Ain't Misbehavin'*. Other pros strutting their stuff included Liz Callaway, Karen Ziemba and especially Christiane Noll scatting with glee on "Hit Me With A Hot Note."

Those jukebox musicals of the 1970s -- *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Bubbling Brown Sugar* and *Sophisticated Ladies* -- were a godsend. So was Stephen Sondheim, ably and appropriately represented four times. Certainly the

funniest performance of the night was Christina Bianco. Bianco is a YouTube sensation for her spot-on imitations of Broadway legends and she killed 'em with a performance of "Who Can I Turn To?" in the style of Barbra Streisand, Liza Minnelli, Judy Garland, Idina Menzel and many others. But she was just as impressive singing as herself when Bianco tackled "Unexpected Song" from Song And Dance. Hopefully, she'll get more chances soon to be herself...playing someone else, of course. Here's Bianco doing her stuff on "Total Eclipse Of The Heart."

I wish I had a clip to offer of the "bonus song" from the show. William Michals wowed everyone with his marvelous performance -- without a mike -- at the last showcase. Siegel wisely brought him back to deliver that warhorse from 1965's Man Of La Mancha, "The Impossible Dream." It's one of those songs you think you could happily never hear again. But Michals immediately focused your attention on the words and his conviction behind them. This wasn't show-stopper meant to show off a singer's voice, it's a song from the heart. And when sung beautifully and clearly and with purpose the way Michals did, it becomes a show-stopper all over again. Or in this case, a terrific encore.

IN THE PARK ** out of ****

AXIS THEATRE

I came late to the Edgar Oliver Appreciation Society. He's a downtown fixture, an eccentric storyteller who returns again and again to his childhood in Savannah, his love of men, his strange family and his fondness for Prospect Park. Here's Oliver reading a poem of his about the park.

That poem isn't in his new show, but it is a reverie inspired, sort of, by his wanderings in the park. Oliver goes there to work and think and observe. And now he's delivered a show about it. Kind of. Unlike his last fully staged work Helen & Edgar, this brief one hour monologue is far less structured. It begins in the park but soon wanders off on various tangents, getting quite lost along the way. Oliver recounts memories of beautiful men he's been attracted to -- a young man on a train when Oliver was even younger, a small statue of a naked boy on a tortoise, the torso of a wounded soldier he saw in a training film and so on. Typically, he doesn't engage with these men; they're just the idea of desire, something kept safely at a distance so he can mythologize and weep with delight over it.

Oliver loves melancholy and his voice is ideally suited to evoking it. How I wish I could describe how his Peter Lorre of a voice draws out the word "park." Pah-aak? Pa-eek? Oh, just watch the video above where he says it once or twice at the very beginning. It's beguiling but it only gets you so far. Oliver's musings are very diffuse this time around. It's not until near the end that we enjoy the focus of a story. Oliver is approached by a young man who offers to have sex for money and their exchange offers some concrete details and actual emotion we can latch onto. It's a blessed change of pace from the reveries that dominated for most of the night.

The lighting by David Zeffren is a huge plus, with the sound design by Steve Fontaine. They work together to maintain our attention when the story doesn't. The score by Paul Carbonara in contrast seems to amount to one brief cue that is randomly called up every once in a while, to no discernible pattern or effect. Still, at the end the image of that statue of a naked boy and Oliver's odd preoccupations and that somewhat sexy meeting in the park combine with some haunting lighting to give us an indelible moment at the finale. It's too little, too late. But it's something.

Still, I remain intrigued by Oliver, though perhaps a little more wary at the same time. He mentions briefly that he was in military school in the early 1970s during the Vietnam War. The mind boggles at the idea of this hothouse flower in a military school. Oliver's frustrated drill instructor must have cried himself to sleep at night. Surely this is ripe material for exploring (assuming he hasn't already)? And not randomly. Please, give us a story with a beginning and middle and end; the reveries will be much more effective that way.

THEATER OF 2014