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NYMF 2012 Roundup #5: The Lindbergh Baby Kidnapping and the Lure of Eternal Youth

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This is the fifth in a series of roundups covering shows appearing in the New York Musical Theatre Festival, or NYMF. Every year I attend as many shows as I can and invariably see one or two that will rank among the best of the year, as well as discovering some new talented performers and behind the scenes artists I'll want to keep an eye on in future productions. Go to the NYMF website for more info on inexpensive tickets.

BABY CASE ** 1/2 out of ****
FOREVERMAN* 1/2 out of ****

BABY CASE ** 1/2 out of **** **SIGNATURE THEATRE**

This is perhaps the most ambitious and potentially most exciting show I've seen at NYMF this year. It's clearly in the vein of Kander and Ebb, a cynical, smart, unexpected tale that bites off quite a bit -- media frenzy, prejudice, celebrity and much more. It will be fascinating to see if this show develops further. Creator Michael Ogborn has been working on it for a decade and the passion and care shows.

It centers on the kidnapping of the baby of Anne and Charles Lindbergh, one of the most famous couples in the world because of his trans-atlantic flight. The baby was ultimately found dead (hello, Kander and Ebb, building a musical around the death of a baby!) and an immigrant carpenter Bruno Hauptmann was found guilty and executed in what was dubbed "the trial of the century" back in the 1930s.

The musical *Chicago* looms large over this effort, with their similar takes on the frenzy surrounding crimes that capture the public imagination. Act One focuses on the crime and Act Two on the trial, with caustic takes on the media sprinkled throughout, whether it's the reporters and photographers that won't even leave the Lindbergh couple alone on their honeymoon or the even more vulture-ish people who snap photos of the baby's corpse and others who pretend to hawk locks of the baby's hair for profit.

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In a smart bit of double casting, Will Reynolds plays both Charles Lindbergh and Bruno Hauptmann, while Anika Larsen plays both Anne Morrow Lindbergh and Anna Hauptmann. Interestingly, Reynolds has more success with the passionately defensive Hauptmann than the tight-lipped Lindbergh while Larsen enjoys her best moments as the stolid Mrs. Lindbergh rather than the wife who spends her life protesting her husband's innocence.

Michael Thomas Holmes has great fun as the ringmaster Walter Winchell, setting up the story and informing us of developments (and the general public opinion) in the rat-a-tat manner of a newsman. For me, the emotional high point was Hannah Elless as reporter Adela St. Johns describing Anne Lindbergh on the day of her testimony in "Hour Of Gold" (a song named after Lindberg's memoir). Their duet has the wrenching emotional power you want and expect, anchoring a story that often has razzle dazzle but not always the undercurrent of genuine heart that such a story needs to make us care.

Indeed, the many songs of cynicism begin to blend a bit, with one piece after another mocking the media frenzy that erupted around the case. Other times, the much-needed heart is attempted but not reached, such as Melissa van der Schyff's passionate delivery of "Dirty Dishes," a song by a servant badgered by the police and the media which stretches a modest image to the breaking point.

The set and costume design by Martin Lopez is top-notch, with stacks of newspapers cleverly used in numerous ways throughout, always reminding us that however painful the story, at least it sells papers. Ditto the lighting by Zach Blane and the graphic design by Ben Spriggs. Above all, the choreography by Warren Adams and the sterling direction by Jeremy Dobrich take a large cast and a complicated tale and deliver it with pizazz.

The performance I saw was unfortunately plagued with audio problems throughout. And now that I know it's been in development for a decade, I'm not certain they're ready to somehow tighten and focus the story even more, uncovering the beating heart that lies at its center without losing the caustic take on the media that drives it along.

Certainly, the umpteenth scene of corruption in "Lawsuit Daddy" felt like overkill, as fun as it was for the actors to perform. And the title is a bother throughout. I've no idea what rights are at issue, but surely a better title than *Baby Case* could be found. It also proves a weak chorus in the title song. Many other songs, however, are strong, and the sense that something needs to be focused more tightly is a common complaint of Kander and Ebb shows... the first time around. And like most Kander and Ebb shows, I'd love the chance to see *Baby Case* -- whatever it's called -- again. It's an intelligent, sometimes truly exciting piece of theater. If it falls short in some ways, that's because it attempts so very much.

FOREVERMAN* 1/2 out of **** THE PEARL ON 42 ST.

Fans of Frank Wildhorn should rush to catch *Foreverman*, a new musical very much in the vein of *Jekyll and Hyde* and the like. Brett M. Boles wrote the book, music and lyrics and while his tale is rooted in the romantic potboilers of Robert Louis Stevenson and the like, at least he came up with an original story: two young men, one wealthy and one poor, become fast friends, discover an elixir that can offer eternal youth and then bitterly part ways over the love of a woman. Their struggles to achieve happiness and true love will take hundreds of years to reach its climax.

Foreverman is handsomely mounted with a serviceable scenic design by John McDermott, so-so projections by Mark Costello and excellent costumes by Anne Liberman and Barry Doss. Those clothes do the heavy lifting when it comes to setting the period and the high adventure mood of a costumer. The cast is strong-voiced and does their best while director Stephen Nachamie ably keeps this ambitious work focused and moving along.

Unfortunately, Boles is akin to Wildhorn in spirit and deed. His book takes forever to get going and continually must stop and explain itself. Plot twists are downright silly -- a kiss immediately reawakens one character's suppressed memories of a past life? Sure, you'd go with it in some context but not here. The cuts back and forth between centuries in the first act feel random and unnecessary. And most damning of all, the songs are filled with tepid lyrics that all the passion in the world can't ignite.

"You're a sun and I'm a shooting star" is perhaps a fine distinction between a woman cursed to die young and a man who will live forever. But the shooting star image is repeated again and again, 'til you're sick of it. Pedestrian rhymes abound. "She's a mystery and a danger/ Now she's here to stay" or "Fiona/ The world bursts into blossom at the sound of her name" or "I know this isn't what we planned/The way we thought our lives would go/ What stranger's footprints in the sand/ Have caused an elemental chain reaction" or "It's madly taunting and strangely haunting" and so on. Like the book, the lyrics spend a great deal of time simply spelling out what is going on. By the fourth or fifth explanation that they've discovered an elixir that grants eternal life etc. etc. your attention begins to flag.

Further, the suspense and drama of those hundreds of years is rather mild. [SPOILER] Our two heros simply avoid each other for that entire time, meet up again unexpectedly and then rather confusingly make amends in a finale that left me a tad confused as to exactly what noble adventure they're embarking on together. [END SPOILER]

Gary Hart

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Despite this, the cast commits themselves wholly to the project with admirable passion. Kelly McCormick and Glory Crampton are the love interests, pretty and passionate when called for. In the small role of Lord Fairwright, Nat Chandler has weight and actually makes a scene of betrayal carry the night's lone source of emotion. Larry Cahn and Karen Elliott as two servants enjoy the brief bit of humor in the piece when they embark on a romance. Adam Monley is the voice of reason as the poor but resolute Jack Mercer. And as Will Timeson (get it?), Omar Lopez-Cepero cuts a dashing romantic figure and has the voice for this sort of popera endeavor. It's a pity he and the rest of the cast don't have songs and story more worthy of their talent.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare In The Park w Lily Rabe) **** Chimichangas And Zoloft * Closer Than Ever *** Cock ** 1/2 Harvey with Jim Parsons * My Children! My Africa! *** Once On This Island *** Potted Potter * Storefront Church ** 1/2 Title And Deed *** Picture Incomplete (NYMF) ** Flambe Dreams (NYMF) ** Rio (NYMF) ** The Two Month Rule (NYMF) * Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2 Stealing Time (NYMF) ** Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2 Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) *** Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2 How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2

Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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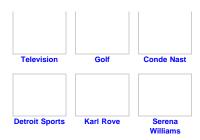
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