

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Broadway and Off-Broadway Roundup

David Sheward · Wednesday, April 13th, 2016

At the top of the second act of *Bright Star*, the onstage bluegrass band cuts loose for a brief hootenanny which sets the audience to clapping and hollering. Unfortunately, it's the highlight of the show. The surrounding story and songs by comedy legend-banjo plucker Steve Martin and Grammy winner Edie Brickell offer a few sparks and smiles but not much more.



Carmen Cusack (center) and cast in *Bright Star*

Credit: Nick Stockes

The sappy plot is reportedly based on a true incident but comes across as soap-opera fodder. There are two timelines. In 1920s North Carolina, brainy but poor Alice Murphy has a ill-starred romance with rich boy Jimmy Ray Dobbs resulting in a pregnancy but no marriage. Twenty years later, Alice, now a literary editor, encounters a promising young writer just back from Word War II. If you have an ounce of sense or ever read a book or seen a movie, you'll predict how the two tales will finally merge half-way long before the final curtain. Director Walter Bobbie and choreographer Josh Rhodes provide innovative flashes, Carmen Cusack makes an impressive Broadway debut as Alice, and a regiment of Main Stem veterans such as Dee Hoty, Stephen Bogardus, Jeff Blumenkrantz, Michael Mulheren, and William Youmans earn their paychecks, but *Bright Star* fails to shine.



Timothy Olyphant and Jenn Lyon in *Hold On to Me Darling*

Credit: Doug Hamilton

Off-Broadway another country-themed show bursts into intermittent flames. Kenneth Lonergan, one of my favorite playwrights, takes a hard look at our entertainment-obsessed culture in *Hold On to Me Darling* at Atlantic Theater Company. Timothy Olyphant of TV's *Justified* and *Deadwood* is hilariously self-centered and clueless as country-western superstar Strings McCrane who foolishly attempts to chuck his celebrity lifestyle to return to work in the feed store in his Tennessee hometown. While *Bright Star* drips with familiar homilies and nostalgia for honeysuckled mythos, *Darling* is a razor-sharp satire of American shallowness, directed with just the right combination of winking parody and hard-edged reality by Neil Pepe. Jenn Lyon delivers a slyly multi-layered turn as Nancy, Strings' biggest fan and later his avaricious wife. She shifts so subtly from innocent admirer to emotional vampire you barely notice the change.



Phylicia Rashad in *Head of Passes*

Credit: Joan Marcus

Two more Off-Broadway attractions feature similar miraculous performances from actresses, but in works of varying merit. Phylicia Rashad preserves through and finally conquers *Head of Passes*, Tarrell Alvin McCraney's rather mawkish rewrite of the Book of Job at the Public, while Marin Ireland dazzles as a wily Polish immigrant in Martyna Majok's clever but slightly flawed *Ironbound*, a co-production of Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre and Women's Project Theater. *Head of Passes* takes the familiar dysfunctional-family-reunion route in the first act and then veers into a tour de force monologue for Rashad in the second. She plays the domineering Shela, a religious matriarch whose faith is severely tested when her home and relationships are destroyed. Rashad raises above the familiar material and as does G.W. Mercier's collapsing set.



Marin Ireland in *Ironbound*

Credit: Sandra Coudert

Majok's *Ironbound* has a more inventive premise. At one grim New Jersey bus stop (Justin Townsend did the brilliantly drab set), Darja goes through 22 years and a repetitive series of dead-end jobs and romances. Loose ends are tied up a bit too neatly and a teen hustler character is extraneous, but like Rashad, Ireland wrestles her flawed play to the ground and beats it into submission. Her Darja is crafty, pragmatic, tough, tender, broken and indomitable all at once.



Joby Earle, Roslyn Ruff, Myra Lucretia Taylor, and Melanie Nicholls-King in *Familiar*

Credit: Joan Marcus

Danai Gurira deals with many of the same themes as Majok in *Familiar* at Playwrights Horizons—immigration, identity, the difficulty of sustaining relationships. The author, whose *Eclipsed* is currently a hit on Broadway, has a sure hand with dialogue and situation, but tends to tip a bit towards the sitcom and melodrama in this otherwise delightful comedy-drama about an Zimbabwean-American family coping with a stressful wedding and conflicts over their traditions and assimilation. Fortunately, director Rebecca Taichman and a solid cast including Ito Aghayere, Roslyn Ruff, Tamara Tunie, and Myra Lucretia Taylor keep the action moving at a rapid clip so that Gurira's occasional lapses such as an absurd reaction to a family secret and, as in *Ironbound*, a too tidy conclusion, don't impair the overall experience.



John Krasinski and Claire Danes in *Dry Powder*

Credit: Joan Marcus

To wrap up this roundup, we return to the Public for *Dry Powder*, Sarah Burgess's witty comedy of equity funds, leveraged takeovers, and economic imperialism. It's funny and clever and Thomas Kail of *Hamilton* fame gives it a sleek staging, but Caryl Churchill covered this territory nearly 30 years ago in her *Serious Money* as did Jerry Sterner in *Other People's Money*. The big revelation here is that financial managers are ruthless—surprise! The four-person cast does their best with the stilted yet well-spoken characters, but Claire Danes has a particularly tough time making Jenny, the empathy-impaired numbers whiz, more than a series of nasty quips. Unlike the previously-mentioned Off-Broadway productions, *Dry Powder* doesn't rise above its limitations.

Bright Star: Opened March 24 for an open run. Cort Theatre, 138 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 30 minutes including intermission. \$45—\$145. (800) 447-7400 or www.telecharge.com.

Hold On to Me Darling: March 14—April 17. Atlantic Theater Company, 336 W. 20th St., NYC. Tue., 7 p.m.; Wed.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: two hours and 45 minutes including intermission; \$65; (866) 811-4111 or www.ovatiiontix.com.

Head of Passes: March 28—April 24. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Tue.—Sun., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 1:30 p.m. Running time: two hours including intermission; \$40—\$50; (212) 967-7555 or www.publictheater.org.

Ironbound: March 16—April 24. Rattlestick Playwrights Theater and Women's Project Theater at Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre, 227 Waverly Pl., NYC. Tue.—Thu., 7 p.m.; Fri., Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission; \$45; (866) 811-4111 or www.ovationtix.com.

Familiar: March 4—April 10. Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue., Wed., 7 p.m.; Thu.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission; \$75—\$95; Sat., Sun., 2:30 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m. (212) 967-7555 or www.playwrightshorizons.org.

Dry Powder: March 22—May 1. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Tue.—Sun., 8 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission; \$95; (212) 967-7555 or www.publictheater.org.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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