Cultural Daily

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Capitalism and the Constitution on NYC Stages

David Sheward · Wednesday, April 3rd, 2019

Three disparate visions of America, two focusing on capitalism and one on the constitution, raise a multitude of questions about where we've been and where we're going as a nation. *The Lehman Trilogy*, in the vast space of the Park Avenue Armory for a limited run after engagements in Europe and London, conveys the story of 150 years of the titular financial clan. *The Cradle Will Rock* is John Doyle's staging of the rarely-produced 1937 labor musical at Classic Stage Company. *What the Constitution Means to Me*, at the Helen Hayes on Broadway after two Off-Broadway runs earlier this season, is Heidi Schreck's unusual stage memoir, recreating her journey as a 15-year-old making speeches on our sacred document cross-country to earn scholarship money and how she views the constitution as a grown woman in 2019.

Simon Russell Beale, Ben Miles, and Adam Godley, in The Lehman Trilogy.
Credit: Stephanie Berger

Lehman by Italian playwright Stefano Massini adapted to English by Ben Power, is the most sweeping with three world-class actors (Simon Russell Beale, Ben Miles and Adam Godley) enacting all the roles in the saga of the Lehman family as they progress from immigrant storeowners in Alabama to kings of the trading floor on Wall Street to losing everything in the crash of 2008. Massini's script brilliantly details what could have a dry recitation of economic theory and history by emphasizing the personal stories of the Lehmans and employing clever metaphors for their rise in the world. Cards, tightrope walking, dancing, and torrential storms are all used to depict the ups and downs of the clan's American journey. Director Sam Mendes skillfully finds theatrical movement to bring these concepts to life, aided by Luke Halls' evocative video projections and Jon Clark's lighting.

Simon Russell Beale in *The Lehman Trilogy*.
Credit: Stephanie Berger

On Es Delvin's massive, revolving cube of a set, Beale, Miles and Godley become a galaxy of characters ranging from the original three Lehman brothers to calculating entrepreneurs to blushing brides to cynical divorcees to aggressive day traders. All three are magical in their transformations, but Beale is especially mercurial creating indelible impressions of the imperial brother Henry, talkative brainy nephew Philip, racy, witty, scandalous wife Ruth, and numerous others. Godley enchantingly conveys a slew of potential spouses for the exacting Philip, the conciliatory brother Mayer, and the ambitious Bobby, Philip's son. Miles captures the tiger-like aggression of brother

Emanuel as well as the take-no-prisoner trader Lewis Glucksman who eventually takes over the firm.

Lara Pulver, Kara Mikula, Benjamin Eakeley, Tony Yazbeck, and Ian Lowe in *The Cradle Will Rock.*
Credit: Joan Marcus

While Lehman's three hours-plus running time races by, the intermissionless *Cradle Will Rock* drags at half the time. Marc Blitzstein's legendary pro-union tuner is more famous for the circumstances of its premiere than the actual show. In 1937, the government-sponsored Federal Theatre Project pulled funds for the production, directed by Orson Welles and produced by John Houseman. At the last minute, the company had to find another theater and the actors had to perform in the aisles since their union forbid their appearing on stage. (These backstage events are depicted in Tim Robbins' 1999 film pf the same title.) The result was an electric moment in the history of American theater, but Blitzstein's script and score are political cartoons and agitprop. John Doyle's intimate staging adds a spark of spontaneity but does not deepen the thin characters or repetitive plot.

Doyle has the company dressed as factory workers (Ann Hould-Ward designed the proletariat duds). They are putting on the show about the sinister magnate Mister Mister (an almost inaudible David Garrison) crushing efforts by Larry Foreman (a steely Tony Yazbeck) to unionize Steeltown USA. Each segment of Steeltown society—the church, press, arts, university, medicine, etc.—is criticized for knuckling under to Mister with the same metaphor of prostitution. Mister Mister and his pompous wife Mrs. Mister (funny Sally Ann Triplett) throw wads of cash at stick figures with caricaturist names like Dr. Specialist, Reverend Salvation, and Editor Daily and they fold like card tables to his despotic demands. Laura Pulver and Rema Webb provide pathos in emotional renditions of "Nickel Under the Foot" and "Joe Worker," but this *Cradle* is mostly an interesting curio rather than a gripping human musical.

Heidi Schreck in her play *What the Constitution Means to Me.*
Credit: Joan Marcus

Cradle is a relic of the past and Schreck's unconventional stage piece, is a living, breathing document, much like the constitution it addresses. A mix of solo-show and theatrical essay, the piece begins as the playwright-star recreates her speech as a teenager to American Legion posts. Under Oliver Butler's sensitive direction and with the proper kitschy setting by Rachel Hauck, Schreck delivers a captivating double perspective, blending her past idealistic views and her present thoughts on how our constitution has not worked well for women and minorities. She adroitly weaves in heartbreaking details of her family's history of spousal abuse including her great-grandmother's death at an early age from "melancholia" is a state institution. Mike Iverson appears as a Legion moderator and then offers his own take on the subject as a gay man. The evening is capped with an exciting and lively debate between Schrek and a real-life high school student (the amazingly self-possessed Rosily Ciprian at the performance attended) on whether or not the constitution should be abolished and we start from scratch. Though the script may have been rehearsed, it feels as if the small company is saying the words and evoking these sentiments for the first time. The play is different, attention-grabbing, and as relevant as the latest headline, performed and written with a passion for justice, a must-see.

The Lehman Trilogy: March 27—April 20. Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Ave., NYC.

Mon—Thu, 7pm, Fri 7:30pm, Sat 1pm & 7pm. Running time: three hours and 20 mins. including two intermissions. $45— $1,050. (212) 616-3930. www.armoryonpark.org.

The Cradle Will Rock: April 3—May 19. Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St., NYC. Tue—Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: 90 mins. with no intermission. $82—$127. (212) 677-4210. www.classicstage.org.

What the Constitution Means to Me: March 31—July 20. Helen Hayes Theatre, 240 W. 44th St., NYC. Tue—Wed 7pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm & 7pm. Running time: 100 mins. with no intermission. $49-$159. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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