

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Chita Rivera Stuns; Zhivago and Neverland Are Duds

David Sheward · Wednesday, May 6th, 2015

The 2014-15 Broadway season has come to an end with a flurry of new musicals which opened just before the cut-off date for Tony Award eligibility. They all know what they want. *Doctor Zhivago* wants to be *Les Miz* and *The Visit* wants to be a Brecht-Weill punch to the gut. *Finding Neverland* just wants to make money. Only the third one is succeeding.

Based on Boris Pasternak's massive novel and David Lean and Robert Bolt's prestigious 1965 film adaptation (and set to close on May 10), *Doctor Zhivago* is the latest in a long line of Euro-pop-influenced tuners seeking to cash in on the record-shattering success of the first smashes in the field *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables*. *Zhivago*'s emulation of the latter show is apparent throughout, right down to the same upturned-chairs motif in Michael Scott-Mitchell's stark set design. Only this time instead of the French revolution we're in the middle of the Russian one and the saintly hero (Zhivago in place of *Les Miz*'s Jean Valjean) has two antagonistic adversaries (the slimy Komarovskiy and the fanatic Pasha) rather than one (Valjean's nemesis Inspector Javert).



Kelli Barrett and Tam Mutu in *Doctor Zhivago*

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Book-writer Michael Weller crams in enough plot twists for a decade's worth of Soviet soap operas while the music of Lucy Simon and lyrics by Michael Korie and Amy Powers evoke the score of every other show of this genre, from *Chess* to *Love Never Dies* to *A Tale of Two Cities*. Only Maurice Jarre and Paul Francis Webster's "Somewhere My Love," the familiar theme from the movie, imparts honest emotion rather than clichés and it's basically thrown away, briefly sung by a chorus of wartime nurses. Unlike *Les Miz*, there is no comic relief (remember the avaricious Thenardiers?) except for one forced number where the jokes involve vomiting and the toilet. Des McAnuff's frantic staging confuses rather than clarifies the action despite constant projected super-titles announcing the dates and location as if we were in a train station.

Tam Mutu has a virile presence and singing voice, but there's not much chemistry between him and Kelli Barrett's sweet-voiced but too contemporary Lara. Paul Alexander Nolan's hysterical Pasha goes way over the top while Tom Hewitt's subtler Komarovskiy is the only compelling figure amidst the endless carnage and upheaval. The *Doctor*'s prognosis for a long run is not a good one.

Fake tumult pervades *Zhivago*, but actual mortality haunts *The Visit*. It's the last show by the late Fred Ebb and John Kander and will likely be the final star vehicle for the legendary Chita Rivera.

"I'm unkillable," her character, the icy millionairess Claire Zachanassian, says, and the audience wildly applauds. That acknowledgement jerks us out of the dark world book-writer Terrence McNally, the songwriters, and director John Doyle have created and thrusts us into the nicey-nicey region of "up" Broadway musicals and that's the show's whole problem. This visit is supposed to be a journey into the corrupt soul of mankind and it winds up being a stroll down memory lane.

The original play by Frederich Dürrenmatt details the return of Claire, the world's wealthiest woman to her impoverished hometown. She promises to give the burg billions if the citizens will give her the dead corpse of shopkeeper Anton Schell (a bedraggled Roger Rees), the man who wronged her as a girl. Employing only black suitcases, a coffin, and yellow shoes symbolizing Claire's golden offer and set in Scott Pask's nightmarish depot environment, Doyle delivers an eerie, hypnotic production. But McNally, Kander and Ebb emphasize the long-ago romance of Claire and Anton. They add ghost versions of the couple's younger selves (gorgeous Michelle Veintimilla and John Riddle) and transform Claire from an avenging angel into a slightly sardonic old darling. The authors are split between cynicism and sentiment and the result is a middling porridge, neither too hot nor too cold, but not just right either.

But Rivera is the *raison d'être* of this show and she elegantly conveys Claire's harsh history of abuse, neglect, and avarice. Though in her eighties, she moves with grace and economy, her slightest gesture containing decades of experience. The same holds true for her voice which she husbands with care, doling out each note like a precious drop of her very essence. When she dances with Veintimilla as her girlish self, it's heartbreakingly bittersweet. Rees adeptly depicts Anton's shabbiness and desperation—aided by Ann Hould-Ward's eloquently distressed costumes—but Anton is required to sweetly accept his fate with a smile in this version, a move not even an actor of his skill can make creditable. Plus he seemed unsure of his lyrics at the performance attended. David Garrison, Mary Beth Piel, Rick Jones, and Jason Daniele are suitably grasping as the townspeople and Tom Nelis, Chris Newcomer, and Matthew Deming are fascinatingly spooky as Claire's entourage.



Matthew Morrison and Kelsey Grammer in *Finding Neverland*
Credit: Carol Rosegg

The Visit may be a lukewarm entree, but *Finding Neverland* is an overly sweet plate of melted ice cream. Based on Allan Knee's play and the 2004 film, this gloppy confection follows Scottish playwright J.M. Barrie as he draws inspiration from a widow and her four boys to create Peter Pan. The film was appealing to both adults and kids, but this musical version is strictly for the small fry. James Graham's book is loaded with ninth-grade gags and the music and lyrics by Gary Barlow and Eliot Kennedy are generic and sloppy. I ran out of space on my notepad to write down all the off-rhymes ("time/blind," "hide/survive," "leaving me/believe in me"). The biggest shock was Diane Paulus' juvenile staging. This skilled director has combined the wonder of theater with a mature sensibility in *Pippin*, but here the effects are theme-parkish and the actors mug up a storm, forcing tears and laughs instead of naturally allowing them to flow. As Barrie, Matthew Morrison does his best to create a believable throughline of character as does Laura Michelle Kelly as Mrs. Davies, the charming widow. Kelsey Grammer stoops to sitcom shtick as the producer Charles Frohman and a dream version of Captain Hook. Unless you are seven years old, don't bother trying to find this *Neverland*.

Doctor Zhivago: Opened April 21 for an open run and closing May 10. Broadway Theatre, 1681

Broadway, 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 40 mins. including intermission. \$42.50—\$145. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

The Visit: Opened April 23 for an open run. Lyceum Theatre, 149 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue.—Thu., 8 p.m.; Fri., Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: 100 minutes with no intermission. \$29—\$149. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

Finding Neverland: Opened April 15 for an open run. Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, 205 W. 46th St., NYC. Tue.—Thu., 7:30 p.m.; Fri., Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 40 mins. including intermission. \$72—\$147. (800) 745-3000 or www.ticketmaster.com.

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

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