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Hurricanes, Volcanoes, and Meteor Showers on Broadway

David Sheward · Wednesday, December 13th, 2017

Hurricanes, volcanoes, and meteor showers mark a trio of recent Broadway openings with laughter and delight rather than devastation. Theatergoers entering Circle in the Square for Michael Arden's life-affirming revival of *Once on This Island* will think it's been hit by a hurricane. Before the show starts, cast members dressed in cast-off materials are wading through debris, tending to a live goat and chickens, and giving and receiving vaccinations. Reflective of the recent spate of natural disasters afflicting the play's Caribbean setting, Arden and set design Dane Laffrey have created an incredibly life-like community struggling to come back from disaster. Against this tragic backdrop, the magnificent company tells book-writer-lyricist Lynn Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty's joyous story of survival and spirituality. Music supervisor Chris Fenwick makes the score feel like it's being played by a really top notch beach band.



Mia Williamson, Alex Newell, and Hailey Kilgore and company in *Once on This Island*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The simple plot follows the vibrant orphan girl Ti Moune as she sacrifices everything for the love of a rich boy. Meanwhile, the island gods of water, earth, life, and death guide her. In its original 1990 Broadway staging, *Island* was a charming bauble, now it's a stirring, enveloping experience. Laffrey's environmental set, complete with an onstage pond and a wrecked truck, are an entire world, cleverly morphed into dozens of locales by Arden's supple direction and Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer's mercurial lighting. Clint Ramos's imaginative costumes add to the makeshift milieu. Examples of Ramos' ingenuity include a plastic tablecloth skirt and a crown fashioned from extension cords.

Newcomer Hailey Kilgore is a spectacular surprise as Ti Moune, displaying a rich, emotive voice, expressive dancing (Camille A. Brown's choreography is stunning), and an impressive acting range. She conveys Ti Moune's gritty determination, bubbly zest for life, and her heartbreaking sorrow when the gap between the two lovers proves too wide. Elegant Lea Salonga, earthy Alex Newell, diabolical Merle Dandridge, and powerful Quentin Earl Darrington make a fearsome foursome of deities in this enchanting *Island*.

Another Broadway musical offers an equally joyful seaside-themed evening, but a decidedly goofier one. *SpongeBob SquarePants* features all the adorable characters from the long-running Nickelodeon cartoon series brought to life by David Zinn's wacko costumes. Zinn also designed the Rube Goldberg-inspired set which resembles a giant water-park ride. Familiarity with the perennially cheerful SpongeBob and his fellow citizens of the underwater hamlet of Bikini Bottom

is helpful but not essential for delighting in this fun-filled romp, staged with a combination of child-like glee and adult sophistication by Tina Landau.



Lilli Cooper, Ethan Slater, Danny Skinner, Brian Ray Norris, and company in *SpongeBob SquarePants the Broadway Musical*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

There are a few caveats. The average series segment runs 11 minutes, but this show clocks in at a somewhat bloated two hours and 20 minutes. Kyle Jarrow's otherwise snappy book could lose a half-hour particularly during an extended adventure sequence as SpongeBob, Sandy the Squirrel and Patrick Starfish scale a mountain to plug up a soon-to-erupt volcano. In addition, one or two songs could be excised from the pop-flavored score. Despite boasting 22 different composers and lyricists including David Bowie, Sara Bareilles, Aerosmith, They Might Be Giants, and Cyndi Lauper, all the tunes sound the same as every other ditty about overcoming obstacles, perfect days, and keeping friends.

As the titular yellow porous hero, the athletic Ethan Slater twists his body into outrageous shapes and expresses the essence of SpongeBob (child-like enthusiasm) without becoming too syrupy. Danny Skinner's clueless Patrick and Lilli Cooper's spunky Sandy also capture the spirit of their animated counterparts, while Gavin Lee as Squidward Q. Tentacles stops the show with a flashy multi-legged tap number (Christopher Gattelli provided the flashy choreography). There are also comic and vocal highlights from Wesley Taylor's villainous Plankton, Brian Ray Norris' hard-shelled Mr. Krabs, and Jai' Len Christine Li Josey as his daughter Pearl the Whale (you have to know the show to understand how father and daughter can be of two different species.) Some adults may chafe at all the giggly silliness, but for kids and kids at heart, this is a sweet, watery treat.



Amy Schumer in Steve Martin's *Meteor Shower*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Like *SpongeBob*, Steve Martin's *Meteor Shower* is as substantial as a soap bubble. At 75 minutes, it feels skimpy for a high-priced Broadway attraction, but that one hour and 15 minutes is packed with hilarity. The playlet is essentially an extended *Saturday Night Live* skit with nicey-nicey repressed hosts Corky and Norm tormented by aggressive guests from hell Gerald and Laura as they watch the titular cosmic light show. Like Martin's previous works for the theatre (*Picasso at the Lapine Agile*, *Wasp*), *Meteor* takes a slight idea and stretches it as far as possible without snapping it. Jerry Zaks' zippy direction mines extra yucks from Martin's brief but gut-busting script. As Corky, comedienne-writer Amy Schumer exhibits split-second timing and an instinct for physical comedy worthy of Carol Burnett or Lucille Ball. Laura Benanti nearly steals the show with her sexy, bitchy take on the guest Laura. Jeremy Shamos as Norm and

Keegan-Michael Key (of the comedy team Key and Peele) as Gerald don't shine quite as brightly as the women, but do get their share of laugh-inducing moments. Don't waste any brain cells trying to search for hidden meaning, messages on marriage and relationships, or satire on the Theater of the Absurd, just sit back and guffaw.

Once on This Island: Opened Dec. 3 for an open run. Circle in the Square, 1633 Broadway, NYC. Mon 8pm, Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm & 7:30pm. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission. \$49—\$159.50. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

SpongeBob SquarePants the Broadway Musical: Opened Dec. 4 for an open run. Palace Theatre, 1564 Broadway, NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 1pm & 6:30pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. with no intermission. \$39—\$139. (877) 250-2929. www.ticketmaster.com.

Meteor Shower: Nov. 29—Jan. 21, 2018. Booth Theatre, 222 W. 45th St., NYC. Schedule varies. Running time: 75 mins. with no intermission. \$59—\$169. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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

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