

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Kings, Canines, and Conga Lines on Broadway

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 11th, 2015

Three recent openings offer examples of the most prevalent types of Broadway shows: the British snob hit (*King Charles III*), the star-vehicle revival (*Sylvia*), and the jukebox musical, Lifetime-TV bio pic subdivision (*On Your Feet!*). The first is perfection and the latter two have their share of flaws endemic to their genre, but still contain pleasures of a kind.



Tim Pigott-Smith in *King Charles III*.

Credit: joan Marcus

King Charles III arrives from London on a wave of adulation including the Olivier Award and it's all deserved. This is an ingenious political satire, acted and staged with just the right combination of passion and humor. Employing Shakespearean verse and referencing several of the Bard's royal dramas, playwright Mike Bartlett imagines a near future when Queen Elizabeth II has died and her son, patient Prince Charles (the brilliant Tim Pigott-Smith) will finally ascend to the throne. But a constitutional crisis arises when Charles refuses to sign a Parliament bill curtailing freedom of the press. Machiavellian plots unfold as Prince William (a dashing Oliver Chris) and a Lady Macbeth-like Kate Middleton (the multidimensional Lydia Wilson) scheme to surpass the new king before his coronation. William's brother, the fun-loving Prince Harry (a strong Richard Goulding) provides another wrinkle. Tired of endless public scrutiny, he begs his dad to allow him to renounce his title and join his girlfriend Jess (flinty Tafline Steen), a radical art student, as a private citizen. Both plot threads examine the perilous role of the monarchy in the 21st century. Bartlett asks hard questions such as: Is England still England without a crowned head, however ceremonial, atop its government?

I was pleasantly surprised at Bartlett's clever and deft script, since I was less than enchanted by the last play of his I saw, the simplistic and condescending *Cock*, presented Off-Broadway in 2012. *King Charles* is light-years away from that bisexual triangle comedy, where gay relationships were reduced to purely sexual connections. Government, media, history, and national identity are considered here in complex and fascinating detail. Rupert Goold's sleek production and the gradually deepening performances draw us in. At first these royals seem like caricatures and are greeted with audience laughter, but as the stakes grow higher, they take on the Shakespearean qualities of ambition and tragedy their dialogue suggests. Pigott-Smith is shattering as the Richard II-ish Charles, initially a buffoon, but increasing in dignity as he battles for his convictions against the forces of convenience.



Matthew Broderick and Annaleigh Ashford in *Sylvia*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

From sharp satire, we move to comfy comedy. *Sylvia* is a pleasant enough little number from the prolific pen of A.R. Gurney, the chronicler of the American WASP in such keenly-observed works as *The Cocktail Hour*, *Love Letters* and *The Dining Room*. Originally presented Off-Broadway in 1995, *Sylvia* concerns Greg, a disaffected money-market salesman whose midlife crisis manifests itself in a borderline obsessive affection for the titular stray mutt he finds in Central Park. The gimmick is the pooch is played by a human actress and she communicates with the other characters in intelligent speech. (Barks are replaced with Hey-Hey-Hey). Gurney affectionally depicts Greg's malaise and the anchor he finds in Sylvia's unconditional love, much to the dismay of his practical and jealous wife Kate.

This revival has its share of chuckles and pathos, but the four-person ensemble is wildly off-balance in a rare disjointed staging by the usually proficient Daniel Sullivan. The nominal star is Matthew Broderick, whose wife Sarah Jessica Parker played Sylvia in the original production. The once charming Ferris Bueller and adorably nebbishy Leo Bloom of *The Producers* is now in a mid-age funk not unlike Greg's. In his last few Broadway outings such as *It's Only a Play* and the musical *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, Broderick has been stiff and dull, bordering on zombie status. He does show signs of life here, but a regular pulse is hardly enough to sustain a leading role. As if to compensate, Robert Sella overplays his three supporting parts including a boorish fellow dog lover Greg meets in the park, an alcoholic female friend of Kate's, and a transgender marriage counselor (this last one borders on the offensive.)

The real star power is wielded by the two women of the cast—Tony winners Annaleigh Ashford as the canine female lead and Julie White as the put-upon spouse. The delightful Ashford has the showier role, flinging herself around David Rockwell's cartoonish set with abandon, but both are brilliant. White captures Kate's comic frustration with Sylvia's slobbering, pooping, and stealing her husband's affection without going overboard as Sella does. Because of the two actresses' dynamism, the focus shifts to the interspecies rivalry between Sylvia and Kate, and away from Greg's male menopausal struggle. The most striking moment of the show comes at the end when Greg and Kate address the audience directly about their final days with Sylvia. White laughs to hide Kate's reluctant but real love for the dog and then she pushes back tears. It's a beautiful ending, but Broderick's Greg barely registers.



Ana Villafane in *On Your Feet! The Story of Emilio and Gloria Estefan*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

On Your Feet! The Story of Emilio and Gloria Estefan registers on the Richter scale, but not on the believability curve. This latest jukebox-bio musical is given a dance-floor-worthy staging by director Jerry Mitchell and choreographer Sergio Trujillo, but Alexander Dinelaris' book is strictly by the numbers. There is one genuinely funny line about Swedish fans at an Estefan concert being so white they look like Q-tips and only the Act One finale displays originality. In order to get their potential crossover hit "Conga" played on mainstream stations, Gloria and Emilio play it anywhere they can get a booking including a bar mitzvah, an Italian wedding and a Shriners' meeting (shades of *Bye Bye Birdie*). The partygoers at these various events joyously clash with audience members in the aisles in a riotous celebration.

Otherwise it's business as usual, with the Estefans rising to the top despite personal hardships, then suffering a catastrophic setback to finally triumph with Gloria belting out an inspirational number at a music awards ceremony. All of these events are true, yet they could have depicted with more wit and imagination. Despite the shortcomings, the rhythm will definitely get you. Ana Villafane becomes a Broadway star in a blazing turn as Gloria, recreating her vocals but not imitating them. Josh Segarra is a sexy and compelling Emilio, Andrea Burns gives steely support as Gloria's disapproving mother and Alma Cuervo is an endearing grandmother.

On Your Feet will get you on your feet, *Sylvia* will give you a few laughs, but *King Charles III* gives you a truly exciting night of theater.

King Charles III: Nov. 1—Jan. 31. Music Box Theatre, 239 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, 30 mins. including intermission. \$37—\$149. (212) 239-4200 or www.telecharge.com.

Sylvia: Oct. 27—Jan. 24. Cort Theatre, 138 W. 48th St., NYC. Tue.—Thu., 7 p.m.; Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$37—\$147. (212) 239-4200 or www.telecharge.com.

On Your Feet! The Story of Emilio and Gloria Estefan: Opened Nov. 5 for an open run. Marquis Theatre, 1535 Broadway, NYC. Tue., 7 p.m.; Wed.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. \$55—\$149. (800) 653-8000 or www.ticketmaster.com.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com.

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