

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

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### ***Disappear-ing Act***

David Sheward · Monday, January 19th, 2026

People who make movies and write novels are terrible at relationships. What's more they don't give a hoot about the environment or climate change unless their more mature teenage kids force them to. That's the take-away from Erica Schmidt's dark comedy *The Disappear*, presented by Audible at the Minetta Lane Theater. There are some funny moments in this *Virginia Woolf* wanna-be, but the entire evening feels like a sitcom version of Noah Baumbach's 2019 film *Marriage Story* which handled basically the same material of a show-biz couple splitting with more subtlety and depth. Schmidt deserves credit for clever dialogue and a few insightful observations on art versus reality and our narcissistic culture, but the characterizations are too often inconsistent and the plot feels overly familiar and forced.



Hamish Linklater and Miriam SIlverman in *The Disappear*.

Credit: Jeremy Daniel

Volatile film director Benjamin Braxton (appropriately obnoxious Hamish Linklater) and his wife, artistically successful novelist Mira Blair (complex Miriam Silverman) are at each others' throats. He feels belittled, frustrated and desperate for fresh passion after 20 years of marriage while she barely tolerates his selfishness and obliviousness to household duties. Their frayed union is hanging by a thread. The only thing keeping them together seems to be their environmentally-conscious young daughter Dolly (multi-faceted Anna Mirodin) and Mira's tenacious belief in long-term matrimony. While working on his latest project, Benjamin has become obsessed with flighty actress Julie Wells (Madeline Brewer in a total switch from her submissive Janine on *The Handmaid's Tale*). But when hot young star Raf Night (sexy Kelvin Harrison Jr.) signs on to co-star with Julie, he makes Mira's collaborating on the screenplay a condition of his participation.



Miriam Silverman, Dylan Baker, and Hamish Linklater in *The Disappear*.

Credit: Jeremy Daniel

Of course, the husband and wife's working together spells disaster. Their clashes form the meat of the play, but their go-rounds soon become repetitious. In addition, Schmidt's direction emphasizes broad comedy and screaming matches with little room for nuance. There is a furious onstage sexual encounter between Benjamin and Mira which offers insight into their love-hate bond (kudos to Intimacy Director Alison Novelli), but it's not enough to make clear why these two have stayed together if they make each other so miserable. Plus the characters' motivations and objectives shift radically depending on the latest plot twist. Julie is portrayed as an eccentric dimwit, but changes to a take-charge, self-determined feminist by the final curtain. Early in the play, acerbic British producer Michael Bloom (valuable Dylan Baker) angrily claims no one but him will finance Benjamin's films or put up with his erratic behavior. Later he argues that Benjamin is a genius and must be given his space.

Schmidt also inserts a sub-theme of the adults' indifference to Dolly's environmental causes. Michael mentions his house has been destroyed in recent wildfires and Dolly insists on planting trees to balance out her parents' gigantic carbon footprint caused by their international travel. This is a potentially impactful aspect of the story, but Schmidt does not develop it fully. Set designer

Brett J. Banakis does incorporate outdoor plant life into the couple's handsome rustic residence.



Anna Mirodin, Madeline Brewer, and Hamish Linklater in *The Disappear*.

Credit: Jeremy Daniel

You can't fault the cast for the flaws of the play. Linklater does his best with Benjamin who has to be the most repulsive character on a New York stage in the past few decades. He manages to find this narcissist's vulnerable core, but Schmidt make him such a vile egotist it's hard to sympathize with or even tolerate him. Silverman displays Mira's ambiguous feelings towards her husband as well as her conflict between her writing career and her role as wife and mother. Brewer makes Julie's transformation from ditz to heroine at least somewhat plausible and Harrison has funny moments spoofing Hollywood up-and-comers. Mirodin balances adolescent entitlement with global concerns, making Dolly a layered character.

Dylan Baker makes the most of his supporting role as the producer. He invests Michael with such a strong subtext and history, it's apparent why he remains loyal to the unreliable Benjamin. Even the most off-hand, seemingly casual line gains meaning in his experienced hands. When Michael furiously explains his new diet with a viciously delivered "I'm off cheese!," it brings the house down.

Perhaps most confusing is the title. What exactly is disappearing? Is it the power couple's marriage? The environment? Both? Schmidt doesn't make it clear nor does she define her characters strongly enough for us to care whether they disappear or not.

***The Disappear: Jan. 15—Feb. 22. Audible at the Minetta Lane Theater, 18 Minetta Lane, NYC. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. [ticketmaster.com](https://www.ticketmaster.com).***

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## Chess, Practice: Uneven Matches

David Sheward · Saturday, January 3rd, 2026

The big question is does the first Broadway revival of *Chess* solve the cult musical's previously impossible problem of the messy book dragging down the magnificent, memorable score? The short answer is no, but it does provide powerhouse singer-actors (Aaron Tveit, Lea Michele, Nicholas Christopher, Hannah Cruz) the opportunity to display their impressive vocal chops and limning skills. Is it worth sitting through the Cuckoo-for-Coco-Puffs script to get to those compelling, stirring songs by Tim Rice and the Abba team of Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus? That's a matter of taste. It was rough going for me for the show's nearly three-hour running time, but when the stars opened the mouths to vocalize, I forgot the melodramatic excesses and lame jokes in Danny Strong's new book.



Aaron Tveit and Lea Michele in *Chess*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

*Chess* is one of those shows that just won't die. It began life as a 1984 concept album like Rice's collaborations with Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*. A fully-staged 1986 adaptation played London's West End for three years, but a highly revised Broadway version closed after only two months in 1988. Ever since, the property has re-emerged in regional revivals, concerts, and recordings. The reason for *Chess*'s long game is the brilliant score. The sexy, catchy "One Night in Bangkok" was a Top 40 earworm. The sweet ache and passionate regret of "You and I" has always brought me to tears. "I Know Him So Well" is a tender duet expressing reflection over a failed love affair with gorgeous intertwining vocal lines. "Someone Else's Story" is another beautiful ballad, heartbreakingly simple.

The crazy story arc which contains these wonderful songs involves chess masters, affairs, the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary, the CIA, and the KGB. Plus this new version by Strong asks us to believe the fate of the entire world hangs on the chess matches—there are two of them, one for each act—with US and Soviet commanders poised to press the nuclear button depending on who emerges victorious.



Nicholas Christopher (l.) in *Chess*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Strong has streamlined the crowded storyline (but not enough) and treats the material with a satiric, almost campy tone, with the Arbiter character transformed into a devilish narrator who constantly reminds us we're watching "a Cold War musical" and laying out the subtext in case we don't get it. This narrator device removes us from the romantic-triangle aspects of the story and inserts contemporary groanworthy quips about RFK Jr. and his brainworm, Joseph Biden running for a second term, and just the mention of our current president (Tveit's character name is Trumper, get it?). It doesn't help that Bryce Pinkham, who has been a delight in previous musicals such as *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* and *Holiday Inn*, delivers every line like a WWF ring announcer. He's at full volume and intensity from his first entrance and has nowhere to go but over the top. Michael Mayer's direction does flow smoothly with David Rockwell's sleek, ultramodern set and Kevin Adams' flashy lighting providing for swift, cinematic transitions. Mayer and choreographer Lorin Latarro also effectively employ a top-notch chorus to move the story along and provide background.



Aaron Tveit in *Chess*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Luckily, we have a stellar line-up selling the score. Aaron Tveit captures Freddie Trumper's narcissism masking his tortured vulnerability, particularly in "Pity the Child." As Florence Vassy, his strategist and lover, Lea Michele delivers the goods on her ballads and conveys the character's conflicting attractions between two chess champs. Nicholas Christopher emerges as a major Broadway star with his soaring interpretation of Anatoly Sergievsky, pouring his passion into "Anthem," a declaration of love transcending borders. Hannah Cruz is most impressive as Svetlana, Anatoly's Russian wife who emerges in the second act to reclaim her errant hubby from Florence. (Florence switches between Freddie and Anatoly.) Sean Allen Krill and Bradley Dean do their best to add resonance to a pair of stereotypical rival intelligence agents.

The problem remains that the songs don't connect strongly with the book. Hearing them on the original cast CD or as stand-alone solos evokes strong emotional responses, but the lyrics don't always fit with the libretto. Too often the songs feel like generic ABBA hits. "Someone Else's Story" was originally in the first act and has been pushed to the second to give Michele a 10 o'clock number, but here feels anticlimactic. In the battle between the book and the score, *Chess* still achieves a draw.



The cast of *Practice*.

Credit: Alexander Mejia, Bergamont

Just as *Chess* bangs us over the head by blatantly spelling out the authors' intent, Nazareth Hassan's *Practice* at Playwrights Horizons, tells us the theme rather than letting us figure it out for ourselves. Hassan is an intriguing playwriting talent. *Practice* offers a captivating look at power politics and manipulative behavior within an avant-garde theater company. But, as with their previous play *Bowl EP*, presented earlier this season at the Vineyard, the author spends too much time telling us what their play is about rather than showing us. In *Bowl EP*, Hassan profiled two rapper-skateboarders hiding their mutual attraction and damaged psyches with coded references to pop culture. Then a symbolic figure popped up and explained the resolution.

*Practice* suffers from a similar tendency to explain for the audience. The first long act effectively details the dehumanizing efforts of dictatorial non-binary director Asa (a cunningly charismatic Ronald Peet) to bend his pliable young actors to his will. Each of the eager performers reveals embarrassing, dirty secrets which Asa unscrupulously incorporates in his performance piece. That process was intriguing, smartly directed by Keenan Tyler Oliphant, and performed with subtext and conflict by a proficient ensemble. (Karina Curet is particularly moving as a Chilean daughter of privilege fighting for her place in the company.)



Ronald Peet in *Practice*.

Credit: Alexander Mejia, Bergamont

But the second act is Asa's resultant theatrical work, clumsily labelled *Self-Awareness Exercise 001*, in which all of his manipulations and deceptions are laid out. Set designer Afsoon Pajoufar encloses the company in a glass cage and costume designers Brenda Abbandandolo and Karen Boyer dress them in post-apocalyptic rags. Though this (perhaps intentionally) pretentious and repetitive segment runs only 30 minutes, it felt like three hours. It's unclear if Hassan is satirizing self-indulgent theater artists or if they want us to sympathize with Asa and their damaged acolytes. As with *Chess*, there's an imbalance here. A smart, intriguing first act is pitted against a boring mess of a second act. This time the better act wins, but just barely.

***Chess*: Opened Nov. 16 for an open run. Imperial Theater, 249 W. 45th St., NYC. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission. [telecharge.com](https://www.telecharge.com).**

***Practice*: Nov. 18—Dec. 19. Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St., NYC. Running time: three hours including intermission. [playwrightshorizons.org](https://playwrightshorizons.org).**

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## **Strangers, Injuries: A Pair of Two-Handers**

David Sheward · Sunday, December 21st, 2025

A pair of two-character shows with differing depictions of amorous connections have recently opened on and Off-Broadway. One is a charming rom-com musical replete with clichés and plot-

holes you could drive a truck through. Despite these flaws, *Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)* is an engaging and lighthearted romp, perfect for holiday fun. *Strangers* arrives on Broadway after runs in London and the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass. The other Off-Broadway offering, Rajiv Joseph's *Gruesome Playground Injuries*, has no songs, is much darker, complex and more honest in its portrayal of the dysfunctional relationship of two accident-prone outsiders who come in and out of each others' lives from elementary school to young adulthood.



Sam Tutty and Christiani Pitts in *Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

The elaborately titled *Two Strangers* takes the basic romcom trope of two previously unacquainted, dissimilar characters meeting in a tense situation, running into conflict and then into each others' arms. There's shopping, sightseeing, sex, heartbreak, and an ambiguous resolution. Luckily, Jim Barne and Kit Buchan's songs and dialogue are snappy and cute enough to overcome the overly familiar story arcs. Tim Jackson's slick and smooth direction and choreography works perfectly on Sutra Gilmour's versatile revolving set, employing set pieces in the shape of luggage of varying sizes to suggest multiple scenes in Gotham.

Sam Tutty and Christiani Pitts are bubbly, bright, and multifaceted as the mismatched pair. Tutty exudes boyish enthusiasm and gleeful hopefulness as Dougal, a lonely British bachelor in New York for the first time to attend the wedding of his estranged dad. Pitts is the somewhat depressed Robin, the sister of the bride (much younger than the groom), who has been tasked with shepherding Dougal and performing a million ceremony-related chores including transport of the titular gateau from Flatbush, Brooklyn to Manhattan. Of course, Dougal's puppyish eagerness and excitement for the Big Apple at first grates against Robin's cynical veneer, but they eventually wind up canoodling. Several secrets involving ruptured family relationships for the two are gradually revealed, but too many loose threads are left dangling by the end of their brief time together.



Sam Tutty and Christiani Pitts in *Two Strangers* (Carry a Cake Across New York).

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Several of Barne and Buchan's songs, cutely staged by Jackson and endearingly performed by Tutty and Pitts, more than make up for these defects. "Under the Mistletoe" is a clever parody of countless Christmas duets from decades past, particularly Frank Loesser's "Baby It's Cold Outside," featuring cringeworthy sexual elements. "American Express" is a fun frolic with Douglas and Robin rampaging through expensive shops, restaurants and hotels before crashing at the Plaza. "Dad" expresses Dougal's fantasies about bonding with his distant parent and "What'll It Be" chronicles Robin's directionless paths in love and life as she mechanically serves customers as a server at a coffee shop. The two actors beautifully balance comedy and pathos, displaying Dougal and Robin's vulnerabilities and impressive pipes. There's plenty to relish with these *Two Strangers*.



Nicholas Braun and Kara Young in *Gruesome Playground Injuries*.

Credit: Emilio Madrid

While *Two Strangers* follows a familiar amorous template, Rajiv Joseph (also currently represented Off-Broadway by *Archduke*) takes a decidedly non-romantic approach to the two-hander format with his *Gruesome Playground Injuries*, now in a bleakly funny revival at the Lucille Lortel, directed with equal attention to laughs and tears by Neil Pepe. Originally produced Off-Broadway by Second Stage in 2011, Joseph's sharply observed script skips back and forth through time in the roller-coaster relationship between Dougie and Kayleen, chronicling their encounters after numerous accidents. Doug is more than accident prone, given to climbing telephone poles in rain storms, shooting off fireworks at close range, and riding his bicycle off the school roof. Kayleen smothers her insecurities with self-harm, indulging in cutting herself, alcoholism and meaningless sex.

The pair come in and out of each other's life, usually after serious injuries, and just miss connecting. From their first meeting in the nurse's office in grade school, Doug believes Kayleen's touch will heal him, but she resists his pleas for affection.



Nicholas Braun and Kara Young in *Gruesome Playground Injuries*.

Credit: Emilio Madrid

Like the stars of *Two Strangers*, *Playground*'s two-person cast juggles outrageous humor with heartbreaking pathos. Nicholas Braun of *Succession* and two-time Tony winner Kara Young endow Doug and Kayleen with a vibrant physical life, throwing themselves around Arnuldo Maldonado's stark hospital-like set making their numerous collisions and smash-ups totally creditable. Brian Strumwasser's makeup design deserves mention for the realistic deception of their scars and bruises as do Sarah Lux's costumes which suggest the different stages in the characters' lives.. Young is especially moving as the damaged Kayleen, covering her soft center with a bristly exterior. *Injuries* is a sort of a reverse romantic comedy and a more devastating, but ultimately more honest experience than *Two Strangers*.

***Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York): Opened Nov. 20 for an open run. Longacre Theater, 220 W. 48th St., NYC. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. [telecharge.com](https://www.telecharge.com)***

***Gruesome Playground Injuries: Nov. 23—Dec. 28. Lucille Lortel Theater, 121 Christopher St., NYC. Running time: 90 mins. with no intermission. [gruesomeplaygroundinjuries.com](http://gruesomeplaygroundinjuries.com).***

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## **Queen, Wife: Two Stephen Schwartz Musicals**

David Sheward · Friday, December 5th, 2025

Stephen Schwartz has the distinction of having three shows running simultaneously on New York stages. In addition to the long-running *Wicked*, Schwartz's songs are on display in *The Queen of Versailles*, a new musical based on the documentary film about socialite Jackie Siegel's quest to build the largest private home in America, and *The Baker's Wife*, based on Marcel Pagnol's film, which closed during out-of-town try-outs before reaching Broadway in 1976. Both scores serve their respective shows well. But the former is a mixed bag of confused storytelling choices and Broadway excess while the latter is an intimate, delightful Off-Broadway charmer.



Kristin Chenoweth (c.) in *The Queen of Versailles*.

Credit: Julieta Cervantes

There are many satisfying elements in *Queen of Versailles*, not the least of which is Kristin Chenoweth's magnetic star performance as well as Michael Arden's fluid, fast-paced direction and Dane Laffrey's elaborate scenery and clever video design, combining elements of campy bad taste and European chic. The same can be said for Christian Cowan's century-tripping costumes. But it's unclear how Schwartz and book-writer Lindsey Ferrentino want us to feel about Chenoweth's character, the vapid but tenacious Siegel. We learn plenty about her driven struggle to rise above the middle-class status of her hard-working parents (solid Broadway vets Stephen DeRosa and Isabel Keating). She works several jobs in high school, gets an engineering degree and survives an abusive first marriage. But her goals and means of achieving them are questionable at best.

After marrying the decades-older, fabulously wealthy Time Share King David Siegel (F. Murray Abraham, doing his best with a thankless role) and going on a honeymoon in France, Jackie decides to replicate the extravagant Palace at Versailles in her hometown of Orlando, Florida. Why? "Because We Can" she and the company sing in a number celebrating unrestrained consumption. Louis XIV (Pablo David Laucerica) and Marie Antoinette (Cassondra James)—both exhibit lovely voices, BTW—pop up in parallel-time scenes, meant to demonstrate what? That Jackie and David are just as bad as the French aristocracy who ended up guillotined by starving revolutionaries? (Jackie buys an actual guillotine without irony.) But then are we also supposed to

admire Jackie's pluck and determination while simultaneously disdaining her boundless avarice and materialism?



Kristin Chenoweth and F. Murray Abraham in *The Queen of Versailles*.

Credit: Julieta Cervantes

Despite the mixed signals, Schwartz's songs are varied, funny and appealing and there is wit in Ferrentino's book. There are poignant moments provided for Jackie's sensitive, misfit daughter Victoria, seeking to break away from her mom's obsessive acquisitiveness. Nita White feelingly delivers a heartbreakingly ballad "Pretty Wins" detailing Victoria's alienation from conventional notions of beauty. Tatum Grace Hopkins as Jackie's orphaned niece Jonquil also chronicles a moving emotional journey, traveling from mimicking her aunt's greed (the funny "I Could Get Used to This") to independence and self-sufficiency. As David's son Gary who also works for him, Greg Hildreth exposes the psychic damage rendered by his dad's coldness. Melody Butiu conveys the loneliness of Sofia, the family nanny who has not seen her real family in the Philippines for years.

But the star of the evening is Chenoweth who captures Jackie's sparkling wit as well as her clueless avarice, re-establishing her status of the Queen of Broadway. Too bad *Queen of Versailles* is so confusing and doesn't delve very deeply into the issues of shallow American consumerism it raises.



Ariana DeBose, Scott Bakula and cast in *The Baker's Wife*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman

Whereas *Queen of Versailles* documents over-the-top culture in both content and execution, *The Baker's Wife* sets its sights on a much smaller level and achieves more. The original production struggled out of town for six months, replacing its leads Topol and Carole Demas with Paul Sorvino and Patti LuPone before finally closing in Washington DC without ever reaching Broadway. The show has since attained cult status with numerous productions in regional theaters, London, and Off-Broadway and one of Schwartz's songs "Meadowlark" has become a popular choice for auditions and cabaret acts. Gordon Greenberg has staged many of these versions and his current incarnation at Classic Stage Company does not completely cover up the show's flaws, but it does take full advantage of its high points. A cast full of experienced Broadway and Off-Broadway players gives full life to the slight story by the late Joseph Stein and Schwartz's flavorful score.

Pagnol's 1938 film, based on a chapter in Jean Giono's 1932 novel *Blue Boy*, is a thin but enchanting tale concerning a small-town baker who sinks into depression and ceases making bread when his much younger wife deserts him for a handsome stud. The village, desperate for their daily supply of baguettes, unites to retrieve her. She finally realizes her younger lover can only fulfill her sexual urges but not her emotional needs and she returns. That's it. Stein's book stretches out the story and Schwartz supplies some extraneous musical numbers.

Fortunately, the cast fleshes out the many colorful characters of the village and Greenberg and set designer Jason Sherwood transform the CSC space into a believable, rustic environment inhabited by credible residents. As the baker and his errant spouse, Scott Bakula and Ariana DeBose have chemistry and spark. DeBose beautifully lands "Meadowlark," the highlight of the show in which the baker's wife expresses her inner conflict between passion and affection. DeBose and Kevin William Paul as her lover also exhibit Stephanie Klemons' eloquent choreography. My only quibble with Bakula's casting as the mature baker is he is still ruggedly handsome and trim, so

there is less of a contrast between him and his romantic rival.

Judy Kuhn is delightfully wise as the cafe owner's wife and sort-of narrator. As the town teacher, Arnie Burton manages to get laughs with small gestures. Even a simple thing like removing his glasses gets giggles. Nathan Lee Graham is salaciously slinky as the lascivious Marquis who keeps a retinue of "nieces." Robert Cucciolo, Alma Cuervo, Kevin Del Aguila, Manu Narayan, Sally Murphy, and Will Roland all have moments to shine in this amiable curio. Between the mansion of Versailles and this intimate French village, I'll take the latter.

***The Queen of Versailles*:** Nov. 9–Jan. 4, 2026. St. James Theater, 246 W. 44th St., NYC. **Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission.** [stjamesbroadway.com](http://stjamesbroadway.com).

***The Baker's Wife*:** Nov. 11—Dec. 21. Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St., NYC. **Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission.** [classicstage.org](http://classicstage.org).

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## ***Queens: Immigrant Drama***

David Sheward · Sunday, November 23rd, 2025

"I did the best I could," cries the intense Marin Ireland as Renia, a Polish immigrant struggling to justify her questionable actions in abandoning her daughter while pursuing the American Dream in *Queens*, Pulitzer Prize winner Martyna Majok (*Cost of Living*)'s affecting but overcrowded new play presented by Manhattan Theater Club. The anguished declaration comes at the end of the play as multiple storylines involving eight different women leaving their native land and scrapping by to build a remarkable legacy in the US come together. Majok creates indelible characters and heart-tugging plots, but there's so much going on, the proceedings can get more than a bit confusing.



Marin Ireland, Nicole Villamil, Brooke Bloom, and Nadine Malouf in *Queens*.

Credit: Valerie Terranova

Nevertheless, she makes you feel for these resilient, flawed women by the end of the tumultuous, event-filled evening. Director Trip Cullman's straightforward, clear-eyed staging, with a big assist from set designer Marsha Ginsberg (more on her amazing environment anon), allows us into this complex world and helps us keep all the stories straight.

The main setting is a crowded basement apartment in the Masbeth section of the titular New York City borough, with a side trip to Ukraine. Ginsberg's detailed set perfectly evokes the desperate, makeshift life of the characters from the cluttered kitchen to the tiny sleeping areas to the flickering overhead lighting fixtures. Majok trips back and forth in time as well as locale. Initially we are in 2017 Queens as Renia is violently confronted by Inna (heartbreaking Julia Lester), a Ukrainian emigre, who is searching for her mother. (No spoilers, it may or may not be Renia.) From this starting point, we flashback to 2001 when Renia first arrives at the apartment which she shares with Aamani from Afghanistan (Nadine Malouf), Isabela from Honduras (Nicole Villamil) and Pelagiya from Belarus (Brooke Bloom). Eventually we also meet Agata (Anna Chlumsky), also Polish; Lera (Andrea Syglofski) who never makes it out of Ukraine, and Glenys, Isabela's daughter (Sharlene Cruz).



Sharlene Cruz, Nadine Malouf, Brooke Bloom, Marin Ireland, and Anna Chlumsky in *Queens*.

Credit: Valerie Terranova

Majok weaves a vibrant, if busy, tapestry of the women's stories and how international events beyond their control influences their fates. In the flashback scenes, they reveal how the attacks on the World Trade Center have turned the women into objects of suspicion and hatred. A fleeting dirty look from a stranger in a Jets cap can turn into a traumatic panic. When Poland joins the EU, it dramatically affects Renia and Agata's status. Trump's first election puts up roadblocks on the path to citizenship.

The plotlines can become entangled as we trip back and forth through time and the women come and go. Some return to their homelands, others remain. Heartbreaking stories of previous tenants are related. The proliferation of characters and stories does thickly saturate the play, but the overall effect of powerfully detailing the immigrant experience is achieved.

Ireland expertly imparts Renia's steely determination, devastating demoralization over her separation from her daughter, and resolve to overcome the overwhelming obstacles before her. Lester is her equal as the similarly driven Inna, whose harrowing experiences transform her from a warm girl to a tough-as-leather survivor. Both Ireland and Lester manage to expose Renia and Inna's vulnerable interior. Bloom, Malouf and Villamil display humor, flintiness, grit and depth as the roommates. Chlumsky, Syglowski, and Cruz make the most of the smaller roles.



Julia Lester and Marin Ireland in *Queens*.

Credit: Valerie Terranova

The realistic scenes are heartrending, but the high point of *Queens* arrives when Ginsberg's set splits apart and the cast becomes a kind of Greek chorus, reciting snatches of phone conversations from the women to their families across the seas. Cullman's understated staging, Ginsberg's detailed set, Ben Stanton's haunting lighting and Mikaal Sulalman's evocative sound design combine to create a shattering stage picture of women desperately reaching out for a connection to their past as they pursue an elusive bright future.

The play's title is somewhat ironic. It can not only refer to the locale, but also to characters' status. These women are not rulers, but they are trying to be commanders of their fate. Majok compassionately documents their efforts.

***Queens*:** Nov. 5—Dec. 7. Manhattan Theater Club at City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. [nycitycenter.org](http://nycitycenter.org).

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## Love Is a Battlefield

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 12th, 2025

Love is a battlefield in *Let's Love!*, Ethan Coen's trio of darkly funny one-acts at Atlantic Theater Company. Sex can be a weapon, a bargaining chip or a source of solace on a rainy night in these short, piercing vignettes. Similarly, the emotional component is an elusive prize the characters are

willing to fight, scheme and strive for. Coen employs the same devilish cynical humor on display in his many films, mostly collaborations with his brother Joel, such as *Miller's Crossing*, *Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *A Serious Man*. But there are also hints of romance and joy amid the bleakness and potential violence. It's a delightfully droll and satisfying evening, blistering and comforting at the same time, directed with a deft hand by Neil Pepe who balances the sharp bite of satire with sweet sentiment.



Noah Robbins and Aubrey Plaza in *Let's Love!*

Credit: Ahron Foster

The main piece of the three vignettes is an extended farce involving an ever-shifting series of love triangles. It's a combination of the snark of Coen's complex screenplays and the rollicking revolving romances of *La Ronde*. Aubrey Plaza, famous for playing wickedly nasty yet secretly vulnerable characters on the TV series *Parks and Recreations* and *Agatha All Along*, rips into the role of Susan, a vengeful virago out to get retribution on her soft-hearted ex Dan (comically gooey-centered CJ Wilson). She claims all she wants in a good roll in the hay, but she really longs for affection. Susan plots to retaliate against Dan for leaving her by hiring a thug to beat him up. But it's turn out the hired muscle, known simply as Tough, has feelings too. Chris Bauer is hilariously deadpan as the surprisingly sensitive hit man. Add in Dan's current girlfriend Faye (sly Mary Wiseman), who is just as manipulative and duplicitous as Susan, and Howie (goofily endearing Noah Robbins), a blind date for Susan who also has his own secret perversions, and you get a wild ride through the minefields of relationships.



Mary McCann and Dion Graham in *Let's Love!*

Credit: Ahron Foster

This highlight is bracketed by two shorter works of varying quality. The evening opens with a pair of alternating interior monologues between a been-around-the-block Broad (yes, that is how she is identified in the cast list) and a lonely businessman, refers to as The Man. It's a rainy night in a deserted bar on Second Avenue. In isolated spotlights, the two patrons spill out their life stories and desperate need for connection. Mary McCann and Dion Graham deliver subtle soul-stirring performances of these nighthawks.



Chris Bauer and CJ Wilson in *Let's Love!*

Credit: Ahron Foster

The last piece comes across as a kind of one-joke afterthought. The Boy (Robbins again, just as adorable) overcomes his insecurities to form a bond after a disastrous first blind date with The Girl (equally tender Dylan Gelula). This piece is a slight doodle with one low-grade big laugh involving food poisoning and a stuffed panda. The three playlets are punctuated by brilliantly sung love standards and originals sung by the accomplished and endearing Nellie McKay whose light, child-like voice reminded me of the legendary Blossom Dearie. The last piece is slight, but fortunately, McKay and the entire cast bring the tone back up with a delightful musical finale. Riccardo Hernandez's versatile sets convey multiple locales with efficiency while Reza Behjat's lighting provide the appropriate mood, dark and depressed to warm and cosy. Peggy Schnitzer's costumes perfectly each character, denoting their attitudes towards love and themselves. *Let's Love!* scores two out of three, which ain't bad.

***Let's Love!* Oct. 15—Nov. 22. Atlantic Theater Company at the Linda Gross Theater, 336 W. 20th St., NYC. Running time: 90 mins. with no intermission. [atlantictheater.org](http://atlantictheater.org).**

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## Intimate *Tartuffe*

David Sheward · Friday, October 31st, 2025

For an intimate and raucous evening with a slightly modern twist, you can't do much better than the current revival of *Tartuffe*, Moliere's classic comedy satirizing religious hypocrisy, or, as it is officially titled, *André De Shields Is Tartuffe*. The Tony-winning Broadway veteran of *The Wiz*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, and *Hadestown* is indeed the main attraction in the title role of a conniving conman posing as a sanctimonious scold in order to take over a gullible aristocrat's household. But Keaton Wooden's clever, fast-paced production has many additional surprises and delights.



Amber Iman and André De Shields in *André De Shields Is Tartuffe*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Chief among these is the very setting. The show takes place in the library of the House of the Redeemer, a landmarked Upper East Side mansion, built by Vanderbilts and now an Episcopal retreat house. The library is especially appropriate for *Tartuffe* since it was constructed in the 1600s (reconstructed by the Vanderbilts) and the play was first performed in 1664. The seating capacity is only 100 and set designer Kate Rance incorporates the audience into the cosy environment, complete with a grand piano upon which Drew Wutke provides elegant musical accompaniment. Costume designer Tere Duncan outfits the cast in contemporary stylish clothes and Moliere's message of religious hypocrisy is given modern relevance.



The cast of *André De Shields Is Tartuffe*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

De Shields is a marvel as the titular duplicitous charlatan. Costumed by Duncan in a cardinal-red gown, his fingers bedecked with flashy bling, he sweeps into the library, delivering a soulful rendition of “*Feelin’ Good*,” relishing his mastery over the pliable Orgon (comically dim Chris Hahn). He employs gospel flourishes and exaggerated piety in his renditions of Ranjit Bolt’s verse translation of Tartuffe’s self-righteous sermons on sin and morality. The highlight of the evening is De Shields’ lascivious wooing of Orgon’s wife Elmire (an elegant and fiery Amber Iman), who pretends to welcome his advances in order to trap him. Wooden’s intricate staging and the precise timing of the players produces gales of guffaws. Lighting designer Yang Yu achieves spectacular effects here as the library is transformed into a sleazy nightclub for Tartuffe’s attempted seduction.

Alexandra Socha and Charlie Lubeck are comically ardent as the besotted young lovers Marianne and Valere. Tyler Hardwick makes Orgon’s son Damis a delightful caricature of puffed-up valor. Phoebe Dunn is sassy and cheeky as the truth-telling maid Dorine and Hannah Beck displays the sharp intelligence of Elmire’s no-nonsense sister Cleante. Todd Buonopane in a tiara has a hilarious cameo as Orgon’s overbearing mother Madame Pernelle. He does not raise his voice into a falsetto or employ obvious drag clichés, but simply conveys the force of her stubborn personality. Though the play is billed as *André De Shields Is Tartuffe*, the entire ensemble is the star.

***André De Shields Is Tartuffe.* Oct. 9—Nov. 23. House of the Redeemer, 7 E. 95th St., NYC. Running time: 90 mins. with no intermission. [tartuffenyc.com](http://tartuffenyc.com)**

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