

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Robot Romance on B'way; 3 Off-B'way Musicals

David Sheward · Tuesday, November 19th, 2024

The almost-human robot is a familiar protagonist in science fiction and social-commentary narratives. Karel Capek's *RUR*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* and *Never Let Me Go*, Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* and Ray Bradbury's *The Electric Grandmother* are just a few of the texts exploring the themes of artificial beings taking on human emotions and coping with obsolescence. The enchanting but hardly innovative new musical *Maybe Happy Ending* at the Belasco after runs in South Korea and Atlanta, features a similar plot. Set in a near future in Seoul, two robots, rejected by their owners for varying reasons, fall in love and find happiness. That's it—the whole show is based on this gossamer-thin, cliched story arc. Luckily, Dane Laffrey and George Reeve's ultramodern design, Michael Arden's sleek direction, Will Aronson and Hue Park's sweet and lilting score, and endearing cast elevate this simplistic sci-fi tale to an enchanting entertainment.



Helen J. Shen and Darren Criss in *Maybe Happy Ending*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman

Oliver (a boyishly adorable Darren Criss) lives in a one-room apartment in “Helperbot Yards,” a

sort of retirement home for robots. He has been waiting years for his owner to reclaim him. His world is changed when his neighbor Claire (delightfully sparkly and sharp Helen J. Shen), similarly discarded by her humans, requests to use his charger. After initial conflicts, the two take a road trip to find Oliver's long-absent owner and for Claire to see the annual migration of nearly-extinct fireflies. Of course, the at-first combative pair connect romantically. Though the book by Aronson and Park lacks surprises, the sweetly simplistic story manages to pull our heartstrings.

Criss gleefully captures Oliver's Pinocchio-like innocence, channeling Brent Spiner's Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and Robin Williams in *Bicentennial Man* as a child-mechanical man. Shen plays a more advanced model bot, who is more aware of the harsh reality of how humans can easily discard their mechanical friends. She endows Claire with a quick wit and worldliness, perfectly complimenting Oliver's goofy naivete, and also displays Claire's hidden vulnerability. Dez Duron, a finalist on TV's *The Voice*, lends smooth vocals to the proceedings as a bandleader idolized by the jazz-loving Oliver, offering commentary on the action with Aronson and Park's creamy tributes to 1940s melodies. Marcus Choi is moving as Oliver's former owner and his emotionally blighted son.

The futuristic sets by Laffrey and the amazing video design by Reeve (with additional video by Laffrey) create an expansive fantasy world where bots like Oliver and Claire are part of the electronic landscape and where memories and emotions can be altered at the press of a button. *Maybe Happy Ending* may be a bit like previous robot-fueled plays, movies and novels, but touches the heart and reminds us what it's like to be human and in love.



Nick Adams and Alaska Thunderfuck in *Drag The Musical*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

The plot of *Drag: The Musical* is as thin as that of *Maybe Happy Ending*, yet the show is a crazy hoot and worth enduring a cliché or two. The exposition is delivered in a voice-over by producer Liza Minnelli accompanied by the gorgeous video design of Aaron Rhyne. Two rival drag clubs are faced with bankruptcy and eviction unless the performers can pull up their brassieres and pile

up their hairdos to overcome the shuttering of their beloved establishments. The Fish Tank is headlined by Alexis Gilmore (Nick Adams), whose management skills don't equal his pizzazz and flair. His straight brother Tom (Joey McIntyre, formerly of New Kids on the Block), is called in to help straighten out the books, family issues are re-raised and Tom's 10-year-old son Brandon (Yair Keydar at the performance attended) reveals an affinity for his uncle's glamorous fashion style. Meanwhile the Cat House, run by Alexis' former lover Kitty Galloway (Alaska Thunderfuck, who also co-wrote the book and score), is also in danger of closure due to skyrocketing rent.

The book and score by Tomas Costanzo, Justin Andrew Honard (Alaska's non-drag name), and Ashley Gordon trade heavily on snarky drag humor and stereotypes of all kinds. The gags are broad and so is the direction by Spencer Liff who also supplied the snappy choreography. The evening works best when the authors kid the format and indulge in self-deprecating humor. At one point, Alaska snidely comments that she feels as if she were in a sleazy Off-Broadway musical, "playing down the hall from something called *The Gazillion Bubble Show*," mocking the New World Stages' long-time fellow tenant.

Marco Marco's fabulous costumes and Jason Sherwood's bedazzled, exploding jewelry-box of a set are as appropriately cuckoo as the characters and the story. Aside from Adams and Alaska's outrageous divas, there are plenty of yucks to be had from Nick Laughlin as a bearded fledging drag queen named Puss Puss DuBois, J. Elaine Marcos as three cartoonish villains who steal the spotlight, and Eddie Korbich as an alcoholic patron with a juicy past. *Drag: The Musical* has no ambition to be the next *Rent* or *Hamilton*. It's silly fun and full of glitz and giggles.



Amanda Lee, Jillian Mueller, Marla Mindelle,
Olivia Puckett, and Natalie Walker in
The Big Gay Jamboree.
Credit: Matthew Murphy

The Big Gay Jamboree at the Orpheum Theatre, goes even further than *Drag: The Musical*

traversing the territory from simplistic parody to clever satire. Both shows mock their own Off-Broadway status, both *Jamboree* doesn't settle for easy laughs based on stereotypes. The razor sharp book by lead actress Marla Mindelle and Jonathan Parks-Ramage and the songs by Mindelle and Philip Drennen mercilessly skewer musical theater tropes past and present as well as a plethora of pop culture targets from the *Real Housewives* franchise to the Upright Citizen Brigade comedy troupe to Mindelle's own *Titanique* musical.

While *Drag*'s plot is a replete with cliches, *Jamboree*'s is a riotous round of original ideas. After a night of black-out drunkenness, wanna-be actress Stacey (the delightfully sarcastic Mindelle) finds herself trapped in a 1940s-style musical where she is about to be married and succumb to housewifely drudgery. Okay, the Apple TV series *Schmigadoon* employs a similar storyline, but Mindelle and her collaborators pile on some many hilarious allusions, their work is fresh and biting. The piece is also a loving tribute to musicals and hare-brained entertainment in general.

Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, Stacy attempts to find her way home by acquiring three similarly stricken friends, venturing into the dangerous woods outside the town of Bareback, Idaho, and confronting a frightening mystical figure. Rather than a Scarecrow, Tin Man and Cowardly Lion, Stacy befriends Clarence (Paris Nix with a thrilling voice and presence), the town's sole African-American citizen who is forced to sing only gospel numbers; Flora (stellarly seductive Natalie Walker), an unmarried woman who secretly yearns to fulfill her wildest sexual desires; and Bert (fabulously flamboyant Constantine Rousouli), a barely closeted gay man dreaming of openly expressing himself.

Employing this wild format, Mindelle and Drennen's songs brilliantly lampoon Broadway standards, all staged by director-choreographer Connor Gallagher with snap and wit. Clarence's big number takes off on every gospel number ever. Flora's solo pays tribute to the sex-kitten splendor of Marilyn Monroe and Ann-Margret. Bert gets to lampoon Donna McKechnie's "The Music and the Mirror" from *A Chorus Line*. Hovering around the edges of Stacy's nightmare is her millionaire boyfriend Keith (*SNL*'s Alex Moffat, delightfully sleazy) who may or may not hold the key to her escape and her future.

The bizarre set by dots, goofy projection design by Aaron Rhyne, nutty costumes by Sarah Cubbage, and versatile lighting by Brian Tovar create the perfect parody environment for this joyously ridiculous *Jamboree*.



Rotana Tarabzouni, Michael Khalid Karadsheh,
Nadina Hassan, Ali Louis Bourzgui,
Drew Elhamalawy and John El-Jor in
We Live in Cairo.

Credit: Joan Marcus

We Live in Cairo at New York Theater Workshop, does have ambitions beyond escapism and succeeds. Set during the volatile period in Egypt between 2010 and 2014, *Cairo* focuses on six young activists revolting against Hosni Mubarak's autocratic government and the extremist regime of Mohammed Morsi which followed. The book and score by The Lazours (brothers Daniel and Patrick Lazour) combine Egyptian-influenced music with the complexity of political idealism clashing with harsh reality.

Amir (Ali Louis Bourzgul), a street musician and Coptic Christian is in love with Muslim Layla (Nadina Hassan), a photographer who gradually backs the revolution. Amir's brother Hany (Michael Khalid Karadsheh) plans to move to the US to study law and escape his country's chaos. Fadwa (Rotana Tarabzouni) has risked her freedom for the cause and fervently rejects any compromise. The closeted gay Karim (John El-Jor), a spray-paint artist, is drawn to the repressed Hassan (Drew Elhamalawy), despite the latter's affiliation with the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. The group's interpersonal relations parallel Egypt's volatile political machinations.

The first act is intense and tight with director Taibi Magar skillfully building the action up to the overthrow of Mubarak. The second act tends to drag a bit with each of the characters' fates getting drawn out. Despite this flaw, *Cairo* is a vital, passionate musical with a captivating young cast, demonstrating the form can tackle difficult, relevant issues.

***Maybe Happy Ending*: Opened Nov. 12 for an open run. Belasco Theatre, 111 W. 44th St., NYC. Running time: 100 mins. with no intermission. telecharge.com.**

***Drag: The Musical:* Oct. 21—March 30, 2025. New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St., NYC. Running time: 110 mins. with no intermission. telecharge.com.**

***The Big Gay Jamboree:* Oct. 6-March 23, 2025. Orpheum Theater, 126 Second Ave., NYC. Running time: 100 mins. with no intermission. ticketmaster.com.**

***We Live in Cairo:* Oct. 27—Nov. 27. New York Theater Workshop, 79 E. 4th St., NYC. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. nytw.org.**

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