Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Few Shows Around Town

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 6th, 2016

If there is one stage musical not to miss in town this month, just for the sheer glory of its talented silliness, it's ***A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*** at The **Ahmanson Theatre**. Ten years in the making, and based on a musty Roy Horniman novel from 1907 (*Israel Rank: The Autobiography of a Criminal)*, this show's giddy pleasures stem from a spoofy book by Robert L. Freedman, jaunty music by Steven Lutvak and smart lyrics by Freedman and Lutvak together, with orchestrations by the eminent Jonathan Tunick. But the highest praise must be reserved for Darko Tresnjak whose precision and tongue-in-cheek talent with comedy delivers a musical that is as much choreographed as it is ever-so-slyly directed.

Surely inspired by Agatha Christie, the Marx Brothers and Gilbert and Sullivan, *A Gentleman's Guide* is the tale of Monty Navarro (Kevin Massey), the resourceful but spurned bastard son and ninth heir to the d'Ysquith fortune, who succeeds brilliantly in doing away with the eight legit d'Ysquith heirs who precede him in rank. In this, he is aided as much by the overbreeding that has dulled their senses as by the mongrel breeding that has sharpened his.

The show is a nonsensical delight, with a hugely talented cast, led by the irrepressible John Rapson who plays all eight dull-witted d'Ysquiths with unfettered *panache*, Massey as the (partly accidental) murderer Monty d'Ysquith Navarro, and Kristen Beth Williams and Adrienne Eller as Sibella Hallward and Phoebe d'Ysquith, respectively. The last two are the lissome, golden-throated beauties who vie for Monty's affections, conspire to exonerate him, and are not morally beyond considering the possibility of sharing rather than winning him.

Alec Guinness played all eight legitimate heirs in *Kind Hearts and Coronets,* the popular 1949 film version of this improbable tale, but this musical adaptation has the virtue of also being an unabashed jest, delivered in a beautifully recreated little Victorian theatre, replete with footlights (Alexander Dodge is the designer, with stylish costumes by Linda Cho), and benefitting from Tresnjak's masterful and unapologetic genius. Catch it if you know what's good for whatever ails you.

Top image: l-r, Kristen Beth Williams, Kevin Massey & Adrienne Eller in a critical moment in A Gentleman's Guide to Love & Murder. *Photo by Joan Marcus.*

A Gentleman's Guide to Love & Murder, *Ahmanson Theatre, Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90012. Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm,* ***through May 1****. Added 2pm performance Apr. 28. NO 6:30pm performance May 1. Tickets: $25-$130 (subject to change) @ 213.972.4400 or www.CenterTheatreGroup.org. Groups: 213.972.7231.*

Danielle Truitt and Larry Bates in *The Mountaintop* at The Matrix Theatre. Photo by: I C

Rapoport.

Across town, at The **Matrix Theatre** we find a set of darker pleasures in Joe Stern's production of Katori Hall's two-hander, ***The Mountaintop***, an intelligent fantasy based on events that might have taken place on Martin Luther King's last night on earth. Played on a spartanly furnished set by John Iacovelli, with appropriately shifty lighting by José Lopez, it benefits from Roger Guenveur Smith's sharp direction and the carefully measured performances of Larry Bates as MLK and a mercurial Danielle Truitt as the maid who delivers a lot more than a cup of coffee to the Lorraine Motel's Room 306.

The fictional aspects of this tale are held together by equal parts humor and pathos, delivering provocative conjecture and a deeply moving flight of both fear and fancy. Bates makes us feel King's torment and his terminal fatigue even as he'd rather not die just yet. Truitt is an actor with an edge, who understands sexy yet inhabits her contradictory moods with such dexterity and style that her various transformations keep us permanently on our toes. Together this pair makes elegiac music sparked by a surprising amount of funny and taunting. The interest never flags.

The Mountaintop *plays Thursdays-Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays 3 & 7pm,* ***through April 10*** *at The Matrix Theatre, 7657 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90046. Tickets: $30 @ 323.852.1445 or www.matrixtheatre.com.*

Matthew Elkins & Anne Gee Byrd in *Pocatello* at Rogue Machine. Photo by John Perrin Flynn.

Samuel D. Hunter's ***Pocatello*** at The Met (the **Rogue Machine Theatre**'s new quarters), tackles a different aspect of our national *malaise. Pocatello's* roots are not in race and politics (as in *The Mountaintop*), but in the deadly disenchantment with the broken promise of capitalism itself. It is a play about the panic, unrest and vacuum found in the shriveling up of America's small towns.

Hunter is the poet of the ailments that are gnawing at the heart of America's heartland. We saw this concern in his *A Bright New Boise,* in *A Permanent Image,* and now in *Pocatello.* Focusing mostly on his native Idaho, Hunter writes penetratingly about such neglected pockets of society, but this production of *Pocatello* doesn't quite do justice to its aim and the play's structure is part of the problem.

With rare exceptions, dramatic works that fuss too much with tableware and food demand extra choreography that can easily turn into distraction. Since *Pocatello* is primarily about philosophical rumination and conversation (some of it overextended) which takes place in a failing restaurant in a dying town, the amount of attention paid to fetching, carrying, placing and removing stuff on and off tables impedes flow. Despite its single set by Stephanie Kerley Schwartz, even scene changes take longer than they should.

It's a challenge, certainly for director John Perrin Flynn, but also for a skilled cast of actors that includes the excellent Tracie Lockwood, Anne Gee Byrd and Matthew Elkins as Eddie, the desperate owner of this fated franchise. Hunter might have achieved stronger results with a little less talk and a lot less business.

Pocatello *plays Fridays & Saturdays, 8:30pm, Sundays 3pm* ***through April 10*** *at The Met Theatre, 1089 N. Oxford St., Hollywood, CA 90029. Tickets: $34.99 @ 855-585-5185 or www.eoguemachinetheatre.com.*

The Garage ensemble in a scene from Robert Allan Ackerman's *Blood*. Photo by Ed Krieger.

BLOOD, a new play with music conceived, written and directed by Robert Allan Ackerman and presented by The Garage at The Complex in Hollywood, earns its one-word title. While the

production has bitten off more than it can quite chew, it is a work in progress that eminently deserves to be reformatted with greater economy of both words and action.

Based on a true event — the knowing sale of HIV tainted blood by American pharmaceutical companies to Japan's medical establishment in the 1980s — it is presented here in a captivating mix of styles: a throwback to the direct-address agitprop of the 1960s and 70s, blended with traditional Japanese ritual and performance forms, including, a brief mock-Kabuki scene that elevates this currently messy but compelling piece, revealing its very promising possibilities.

With music by "The Virgins" bassist Nick Ackerman and "Jet" drummer/vocalist Chris Cester, and declamatory lyrics by director Ackerman, it is by turns trumpeting political theatre and a more poetic attempt at dramatizing an event that, like so many ugly pieces of history, has gone largely unpublicized beyond its immediate medical repercussions.

Despite clear budgetary constraints, a great deal of fine creative imagination has gone into this demanding ensemble presentation, with its intriguing mix of traditional Japanese theatrical forms, costume, make-up, screens and projections employed to tell its story. (Designers include Dona Granata, Hana S. Kim, Erika Furuhashi, Joseph "Sloe" Slawinski among others.) But the power of this complicated effort would be greatly strengthened by the judicious pruning of a meandering and sometimes pummeling script, a lot of which is needlessly blunt and repetitive. No one would ever complain about the use of greater subtlety, or one fewer round of the fine song "We're the Ministers of Nippon," especially when the events themselves are so eloquent in their statement. A future leaner, tighter, nimbler version of this show would be immensely welcome.

BLOOD *plays Fridays &Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 3pm,* ***through April 17*** *@* ***The Complex****, 6476 Santa Monica Blvd, Hollywood, CA 90038. Tickets: $25-$30 @ or www.plays411.com/blood or (323) 960-7745.*

Leeav Sofer and Andrew Huber in *Man Covets Bird* at 24th Street Theatre. Photo by Cooper Bates.

And finally… if you did not see ***Man Covets Bird*** *when it was staged last year at* ***24th Street Theatre****, it is back,* ***Sundays only at 3pm, through May 15****. It is a play for ALL children over 7, and that includes YOU. Here's an excerpt from the original CW review:*

> … this completely fresh 70-minute crossover piece with components of magic realism, theatre and performance art, enhanced by graphic animation, music and song … [tells] a gentle tale of growing up, leaving the nest, learning to become yourself, and learning to include, unlock and encourage others, be they birds, animals or people who may seem different but are not. It is a wise, enchanting and sweet tale of coming of age that reminds us of the importance of stopping now and then to smell the roses, eat the ice cream and all that other good stuff. Its full effect is impossible to describe in words. The show demands to be experienced.

Man Covets Bird *@ 24 Street Theatre, 117 24th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90007. Tickets: $10-$24 @ 213.745.6516 or www.24thstreet.org. Lot parking at 24th St. & Hoover.*

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