

Cultural Daily

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Trips to Margaritaville, Colonial America, and Ancient Babylon

David Sheward · Wednesday, March 21st, 2018

Let me confess that margaritas are my cocktail of choice. Having one while watching the new Broadway musical *Escape to Margaritaville* certainly put me in the appropriate relaxed mood, but the salty sweet concoction in the plastic souvenir glass could not entirely overcome the show's deficiencies. This is the latest in a long line of jukebox tuners with the canon of a musical artist employed as fodder for either a bio (*Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, *Jersey Boys* and the upcoming *Donna Summer* and *Cher* shows) or a flimsily-constructed original story (*Mamma Mia!*, *Good Vibrations*). *Escape* falls into the latter category and it makes *Mamma Mia!* look like *My Fair Lady* by comparison.



Alison Luff and Paul Alexander Nolan in *Escape to Margaritaville*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

The laid-back Jimmy Buffet songbook serves as the spine (if you can call it that) for a simplistic rom-com extolling the virtues of sandy vacations, excessive alcohol intake, and willing suspension of disbelief. The soothing “Margaritaville” was a huge hit in 1977 and inspired a chain of bars and resorts. In addition to his previous hits, Buffet has composed new numbers for the score. The book by sitcom veterans Greg Garcia (*My Name Is Earl*) and Mike O’Malley (*Shameless*) is a Hallmark TV movie with pauses for songs.

Handsome, hunky beach bum-musician Tully meets cute with uptight scientist-tourist Rachel at the grungy hotel Margaritaville on a unnamed tropical isle. She encourages him to take life seriously while he prods her to let her hair down and knock back a few. Rachel’s caustic best friend Tammy and affably goofy bartender Brick as well as colorful barfly J.D. and the hotel manager Marley provide comic contrast. The minimal conflict arises when Tully and Rachel fell for each other—surprise!—and their radically contrasting lifestyles clash. Along the way, a volcano explodes, one wedding is averted and another is celebrated, there’s a tap number with dead insurance agents (don’t ask), and a seaplane lands in the Ohio River (off-stage) with four of the passengers none the worse for wear walking straight into a Cincinnati bar in time for drinks.

Just as in *Mamma Mia!*, details are planted to allow for jokey references to Buffet’s songs such as the lost salt shaker and mysterious tattoo of the title tune. Parrotheads—Buffett enthusiasts—in the audience sang along with many of the lyrics at the performance attended and seemed to be having a grand time, but for me the musical buffet blended together as if we were on an endless cruise where the band only knew one song. If you’re a fan of this kind of schmaltz, it’s the perfect escape from wintery NYC. Christopher Ashley’s slick staging, Garcia and O’Malley’s pleasant-enough

dialogue, and a game cast keep *Margaritaville* from becoming a totally bad beach day. Paul Alexander Nolan and Alison Luff are a charming, attractive pair of leads, but Lisa Howard's sweetly feisty Tammy and Eric Petersen's lovably off Brick are the ones who got me through this mildly amusing but not particularly exciting vacation excursion.



Chukwudi Iwuji and Chris Perfetti in *The Low Road*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

As much as *Margaritaville* is silly and shallow, Bruce Norris' *The Low Road* at the Public following a British premiere at the Royal Court, is complex and challenging. The concept sounds unpromisingly dry: a picaresque Tom Jones-like adventure based on the writings of free-market philosopher Adam Smith, principally *The Wealth of Nations*. But Norris has previously created entertaining and inventive explorations of such deep topics as racism (the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Clybourne Park*), sexuality (*The Qualms*), time travel and physics (*A Parallelogram*), and the paranoid hysteria of post-9/11 America (*The Pain and the Itch*).

To examine the ramifications of Smith's economic theories of unfettered capitalism, Norris has created a fascinating journey through 18th century America, designing ironic parallels between the greedy excesses of colonial entrepreneurs and their 21st century counterparts. His hero is Jim Trewitt, a selfish bastard both literally and figuratively. As Adam Smith himself (played with dry wit by the invaluable Daniel Davis) narrates the tale, baby Jim is deposited on the doorstep of a brothel with a note proclaiming him as the illegitimate offspring of one G. Washington.

Norris puts Jim through a series of misadventures and encounters, sometimes taking us on wild trips to the future, all directed with speed and imagination by Michael Greif who makes brilliant use of the limited Anspacher space at the Public. Chris Perfetti skillfully captures Jim's burning self-interest and Chukwudi Iwuji is his perfect foil as John Blanke, a refined slave who is as erudite as Jim is crude. A large company of versatile veterans including Harriet Harris, Kevin Chamberlain, Max Baker, Crystal A. Dickinson, and Richard Poe shine in multiple roles. This is a challenging work that might be a tad too ambitious—Norris crams in an awful lot—but it's still that rare thing, an American play tackling a big subject with style and intellect.



Angela Meade (center) in *Semiramide* at the Metropolitan Opera.

Credit: Ken Howard

Travelling even further from the mindless beach of *Margaritaville*, my cultural week including the Metropolitan Opera's production of Rossini's rarely performed *Semiramide*. John Copley's 1990 production is stodgy and stiff, but the vocal strength of the company was dazzling. As the titular queen of ancient Babylon, soprano Angela Meade is not a moving actress, but she displays a magnificent voice, capturing the intricacies of Rossini's arias. In the trouser role of Arsace, commander of the Assyrian army, mezzo-soprano Elizabeth DeShong possesses dramatic as well as musical verve. Javier Camarena's tenor is pure, Ildar Abdrazakov's bass darkly thrills, and Sarah Shafer's soprano soars.

Escape to Margaritaville: Opened March 15 for an open run. Marquis Theatre, 210 W. 46th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat, 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 15 mins. including intermission. \$79—\$169. (800) 653-8000. www.ticketmaster.com.

The Low Road: March 7—April 8. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Tue—Fri 7:30pm, Sat—Sun 1:30pm & 7:30pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$75. (212) 967-7555. www.publictheater.org.

Semiramide: Feb. 20—March 17. Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center, 30 Lincoln Center Plaza, Broadway at 66th St., NYC.

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