



WEDNESDAY, MAY 01, 2019

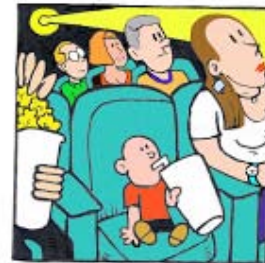
MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "BEETLEJUICE" SHOWS A LITTLE LIFE

BEETLEJUICE ** out of ****
WINTER GARDEN THEATRE

The new show *Beetlejuice* just scored eight Tony nominations, including Best Musical. But its best bet to win a statue is surely in Best Scenic Design. Nominee David Korins gets to play in the world created by the film's director Tim Burton and *he* in turn was inspired by Edward Gorey, old horror films and a thousand other sources. Korins has a blast in this show, creating a nicely askew old home and then layering on look after look for the main set right in front of our eyes. Combine that with ghouls, a giant snake (I mean, a GIANT snake), wacky costumes by William Ivey Long (also nominated) and great lighting by Kenneth Posner and Peter Nigrini (both also nominated) and sound by Peter Hylenski (ditto, or is that thritto?) and you've got a fun show with a pop-up haunted house aesthetic that fans of Tim Burton will enjoy. Toss in Alex Brightman's tireless cheerleading as the title ghoul (essentially delivering the same Red Bull of a performance he delivered in *School Of Rock* even though it's supposed to be subversive rather than inspiring) and you've got a show that's not bad, a backhanded compliment but a sincere one.

Turning the movie *Beetlejuice* into a musical made more sense than, say, *Pretty Woman* for the simple fact that everyone who saw it remembers the big musical number and funniest moment in the film. That's the scene where people at a dinner party are unwittingly forced by a demon to lip sync to Harry Belafonte's "Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)." On stage, the actors actually sing the song, though I think it would have been funnier to have them lip sync, just like in the film. It's still the highlight of the stage show, just like in the movie. And there's the problem. All the fun bits of *Beetlejuice* (just like most of the fun bits in *Tootsie*) feel like call backs to what was done better and first on



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film. Worse, unlike *Tootsie* the movie *Beetlejuice* is a modest comedy at best, so there's not much to mine in the first place.



The show's creators knew that. The film is a collection of gags sort of held together by Michael Keaton's manic turn and the aching seriousness of Winona Ryder (which makes her intentionally all the funnier). There's almost no plot worth mentioning or caring about. So the show must engineer one.

Our teen goth heroine (a solid Sophia Anne Caruso) isn't just a kid who LOVES to embrace the weird. Instead of *choosing* to be goth, she is burdened by the death of her mom, which is a lot less fun. Her dad adds to the pain by refusing to mention his dead wife's name. It takes a haunted house, two very dull ghosts, the sexy beast Beetlejuice, a fake guru, that giant snake and a trip to the underworld (or the Nether Region or whatever they call it) just to get dad to admit he misses his wife too. It's a big journey for a very small and obvious payoff. Ultimately, the show collapses under our lack of interest in the bland ghosts (poor Kerry Butler and Rob McClure, doing their best), the forgettable songs and the heartfelt confessions of a girl and her dad we could see coming a mile off.

Beetlejuice is a lot more fun when it just goes nuts, from the crazy costumes to the chorus of ghouls to Brightman getting all sexually fluid with every character in sight. The first act really is pretty good, almost, thanks to Brightman, a lot of sight gags and Leslie Kritzer doing a great turn as the ditzy Delia (played in the film by Catherine O'Hara). Really, it was Tony-worthy but fell through the cracks in a strong year for supporting women.

We barely cared about the characters in act one. When act two keeps introducing more of them to less and less interest (a bland fake guru/exorcist; an underworld bureaucrat, etc.) along with that thoroughly unnecessary heartwarming revelation, the show's energy flags entirely. (And sweetening the audio mix with roars of applause

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and cheers can't mask that fact.) Thankfully, they reprise "Day-O" at the curtain call. How could they not? But I still say they should have lip-synced it.

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