



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: Good Intentions No Substitute For Good Melodies In "Broadbend, Arkansas"

**BROADBEND, ARKANSAS** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**TRANSPORT GROUP AT DUKE ON 42ND STREET**

Good intentions do not a good musical make. Composer Ted Shen's heart is in the right place with this odd duck of a two-hander show. In Act One, nursing home orderly Benny narrates an on-going feud between two women at his place of work in 1961. Then this widowed father of twins feels compelled to join the Freedom Riders fighting for justice in the deep South. He shadows a bus filled with a rainbow of protestors, protects a friend when the police move in, gets proudly arrested and finally heads back home though he'd love to ride on that bus to the next town.

In Act Two, it's 1988 and the struggle continues. Benny's daughter Ruby is in a cemetery looking for the strength to carry on. We soon realize Benny was killed by a policeman just miles from home. And now his grandson is in the hospital after being brutally beaten by yet another lawless cop. For all we know, that cop might be the grandson of Benny's murderer. Will it ever end?

The stage is filled by just two actors and they are far and away the best and only reason to check out this piece. As Benny Justin Cunningham fills the stage with his warmth and presence, even if the elderly women he briefly assays aren't terribly distinct in our minds. As Ruby, Danyel Fulton has the less interesting half yet she too brings complexity and passion to a part that offers little of that on its own.

Sadly, they are not enough. The tech elements are minimal but even those go astray. Lighting cues by Jen Schriever don't clearly indicate when Cunningham is tackling a different character, though sometimes they seem to do so. The costumes by Peiyi Wong don't seem period enough. And director Jack Cummings III doesn't mold all this together to give the two actors the support they need and deserve.



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But it all begins with this essay/history lesson disguised as a work of theater. Though the two acts are intimately connected, the first act is written by Ellen Fitzhugh and the second by Harrison David Rivers. The music and additional lyrics are by Ted Shen.

Curiously, about half of act one involves that feud between two women. One is the owner of the nursing home while the other is a patient. They bicker and fight over a game of Scrabble. But really their fight is over the man they shared: the patient's husband left her for the much younger owner of the nursing home, but not before the wife wounded him with a steaming hot iron. Benny claims to be refereeing the two women and making peace but really he's just narrating their story. Cunningham doesn't create two distinct women but that's partly the fault of Fitzhugh since their voices tend to blur together. Abruptly this ends and Benny goes off on his civil rights crusade.

The big problem? The feuding old biddies are by far the most interesting and fresh part of the musical. Their story feels like a story, not a noble speech dressed up as a story. And yet, they have nothing to do with the rest of the evening. Half of act one is devoted to this essentially separate tale and then switches over to civil rights. I suppose you could pretend they make peace and so can blacks and whites, but that's quite the stretch.

The other half of act one flows right into the story of Ruby, the daughter of Benny. here actress Fulton has far fewer roles to tackle. It's essentially a monologue and not a particularly fresh or interesting one. Worst of all, the presentation glides back and forth between dialogue and music. Shen seems wary of anything approaching an actual song or memorable melody. Part 5 of "The Bridge" sticks briefly in the mind as Benny sings about how "It's such a comfort to take the bus." And Ruby comes briefly to life via song when she remembers her twin sister telling anyone who would listen that their mom was a backup singer for Diana Ross.

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That's it. The rest is sincere, principled, polite, sometimes politely righteous and even angry! But always, always forgettable. I can't figure out why the story of two feuding old ladies takes up half of act one. I certainly know all why they wanted to illuminate the bravery of the Freedom Riders and show how that struggle goes on. (Act Three might easily have jumped to Black Lives Matter.) But whether you're creating a musical about shopping or slavery, you better have the songs. As Duke Ellington and Irving Mills put it, it don't mean a thing.... See, you knew how to finish the lyrics ("...if it ain't got that swing") without me telling you. High art should not mean a disdain for the low appeal of a catchy tune.

## **THEATER OF 2019**

Frankenstein: Under The Radar Fest at the Public \*\* 1/2

Minor Character: Under The Radar Festival at the Public \*\*\*

Ink: Under The Radar Festival at the Public \*\* 1/2

Choir Boy \*\* 1/2

White Noise \*\* 1/2

Kiss Me, Kate \*\*\*

Ain't No Mo' \*\*\* 1/2

Ain't Too Proud \*\*

The Cradle Will Rock \* 1/2

Mrs. Murray's Menagerie \*\*\* 1/2

Oklahoma! (on Broadway) \*\* 1/2

Socrates \*\*

The Pain Of My Belligerence \*

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Hadestown \*\*\* 1/2

All My Sons \* 1/2

Tootsie \*\* 1/2

Ink \*\*\*

Beetlejuice \*\*

Estado Vegetal \*\*\*

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Cirque du Soleil: Luzia \*\*\*

BLKS \*\* 1/2

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Unchilding \*\*

Sea Wall/ A Life \*\* 1/2

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child \*\*\*

Betrayal \*\*\* 1/2

Fifty Million Frenchmen \*\* 1/2

Freestyle Love Supreme \*\* 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret \*\*\*

(A)loft Modulation \* 1/2

The Great Society \*\*

I Can't See \*

[Heroes Of The Fourth Turning](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Chasing Rainbows: The Road To Oz](#) \*\*\*  
[The Glass Menagerie](#) (dir Austin Pendleton & Peter Bloch) \*\*  
[Terra Firma](#) (debut of The Coop theater company) \*\*  
[Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation](#) \*\*\*  
[Dublin Carol](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Soft Power](#) \*\*  
[The Decline and Fall of The Entire World As Seen Through The Eyes Of Cole Porter](#) \*\*\*  
[For Colored Girls](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Scotland, PA](#) \*\*  
[The Sound Inside](#) \*\*\* (great cast, clumsy ending)  
[User Not Found](#) \*\*  
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POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 7:01 PM 

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