



FRIDAY, MARCH 23, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

Theater: "Escape To Margaritaville"

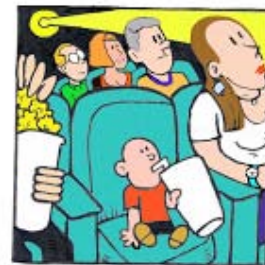
ESCAPE TO MARGARITAVILLE ** out of ****
MARQUIS THEATRE

I can't quite call myself a Parrothead but I definitely boast some Jimmy Buffett bona fides. I grew up in South Florida, I've had margaritas in the Keys, one of my first album purchases was *A White Sport Coat and A Pink Crustacean* (on cassette) and my first concert was Buffett himself. (Or Billy Joel; I can't be sure but they were definitely the first two.)

So if -- like me -- your ears perk up when a minor character is called "Mr. Utley," I can report that the new musical *Escape To Margaritaville* was made for you. That's the bad news since this friendly, innocuous show does not transcend its Buffett fanbase.

Like I said, that's the bad news. The *sad* news, however, is the unexpected and affecting power of certain tunes in this show. When they're anchored to a specific character and a specific moment, songs like "Son Of A Son Of A Sailor" and "He Went To Paris" and even "Margaritaville" -- if you can believe it -- actually pack an emotional punch. (That last number is of course a song about a guy realizing the failed relationship is his own damned fault.) Even as a fan, I really did not expect any of his songs to register in quite that way on stage. When you see some of his songs really work in a musical, you realize that a better, truer show might have made the most out of Buffett's catalog.

Instead we have a *Mamma Mia* sort of show, with a plot so paper thin (and slightly out of sync with his ethos) that it's the barest of excuses to shoehorn in one favorite after another. The good news is that *Escape To Margaritaville* is certainly amiable enough. While it won't match that ABBA blockbuster, at least it doesn't betray the faithful



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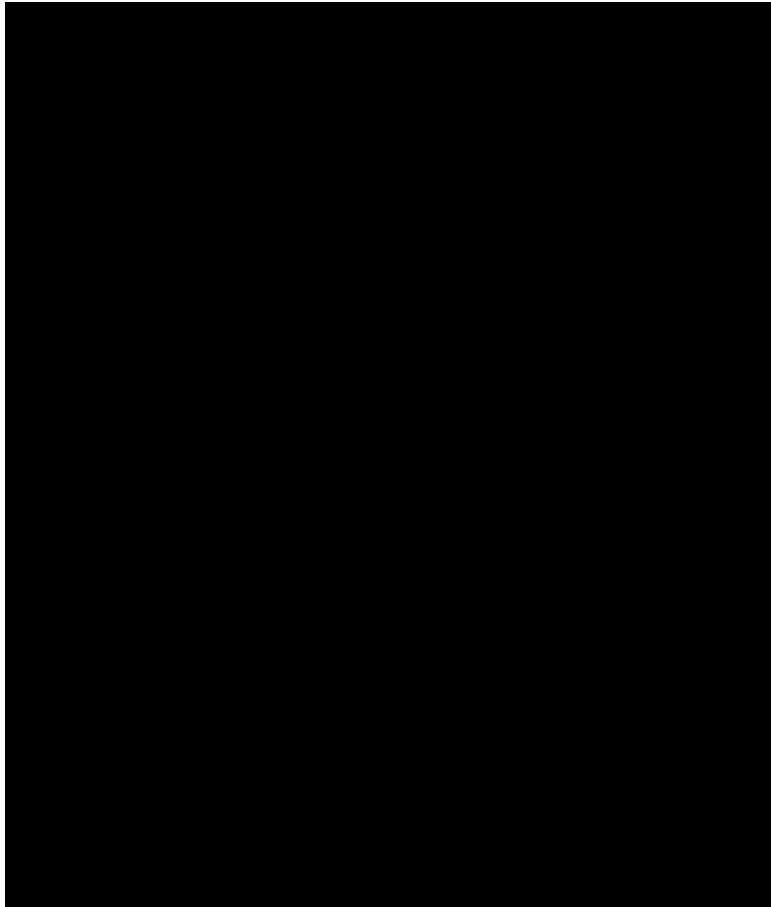
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fans, you can buy tropical drinks at the bar (unlike *Once On This Island* -- they really are leaving money on the table at that hit) and hey, you might snag a free beach ball at the finale!



The setting is a Caribbean island (with a volcano, of course) and specifically the bar Margaritaville. The owner is the sharp-tongued Marley (Rema Webb, making the most out of very little) and the denizens include a schlubby but lovable bartender named Brick (Eric Petersen), the aging J.D. (Don Sparks) who is always looking for his lost shaker of salt and the laid-back bar band singer Tully (Paul Alexander Nolan). He romances the ladies and sends them gently on their way after a little sun and fun.

That changes when two best friends show up for a week of escape. Tammy (Lisa Howard) is getting married after this vacation, even though her husband-to-be puts this full-figured charmer on a diet and instead of buying her an engagement ring he got her an engagement TV. (No points for guessing her story arc.)

Rachel (Alison Luff) is her fetching maid of honor. Rachel wants to help save the planet with alternative energy sources (namely the potato?) and of course she freaks out when there is no cell phone signal or even wifi. Offer her a drink at ten in the morning and say "It's five o'clock somewhere" and she just doesn't get it. The bartender woos Tammy, Tully finds himself falling hard for Rachel and the show

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spends the rest of the evening coming up with reasons -- a volcano, the temptation of a cheeseburger, Grammy Awards! -- to delay the inevitable happy ending. Another problem? Rachel's big number "It's My Job" doesn't quite work -- even with altered lyrics to fit her story -- and Buffett's songs in general don't suit Luff's voice. Just as not every Broadway singer can rap, not all can handle the particular vocal demands of a pop song. To be fair, "It's My Job" has one of Buffett's more ungainly melodies (the song was actually written by Mac McAnally) and finding a song in his catalog to work for her character can't have been easy. Uptight and professionally driven is not Buffett's wheelhouse.

It's all directed with perfunctory professionalism by Christopher Ashley, though act two feels drawn out and the costumes, set design and choreography rarely feel inspired. The main problem is the book by Greg Garcia and Mike O'Malley, who spent too much time figuring out cute ways to signal a song, like having Brick name things that make him happy, things like...grapefruit! And ten speed bikes! Fans sigh happily, knowing they're about to hear "Grapefruit -- Juicy Fruit."

Worse, Garcia and O'Malley get sidetracked into having both Rachel and Tully achieve huge success in their careers. Garcia has created not one but two of the best sitcoms in recent years. Both *My Name Is Earl* and *Raising Hope* capture the working class with candor and heart. So he should have been an ideal fit for the Buffett ethos of enjoying life now and paying the bills later. Instead, our two leads have it all. But a beach bum winning over a woman with his easy going charm is one thing. A platinum-selling, Grammy winning beach billionaire pairing up with an entrepreneur on her third round of financing is quite another story and not one that's nearly as down-to-earth.

Honestly, all anyone expects here is a good time and some Buffett numbers delivered with verve. Nolan certainly handles that with charm and casual sex appeal. (The bar Margaritaville clearly has a gym in the back somewhere.) But much more was possible. Want proof? The simple straightforward appeal of "Son Of A Son Of A Sailor" as Tully strums his guitar and shares his story with Rachel is a quiet highlight.

Instead the musical mixes and matches songs almost interchangeably throughout the show, giving us party tunes and secondary storylines like a slow-burning romance between J.D. and Marley that has no reason for *not* taking place, a dishwasher with a broken arm (so inexplicable I assumed the actor really had a broken arm and they worked it into the show...until it healed in the second act) and other pointless bits like some wire work to reveal our lead couple scuba diving or a jokey scene with Tammy floating towards food. On the plus side, the chorus is happily diverse, right down to a gay couple dancing alongside everyone else without raising an eyebrow. On the down side, that means the four white leads stand out even more as notably monotone.

Suddenly you realize what's wrong: they didn't take Jimmy Buffett's songs seriously enough. Instead of seeing where they worked emotionally, the show just grabs at lyrics and tosses them into the book for fans to discover, like Easter eggs in a video game. Heck, even "Grapefruit -- Juicy Fruit" is a potentially sexy number (as is "Volcano") but in the context of the show it's a tossed-off joke. Instead of story songs that push the show forward, we watch Brick have a pointless acid flashback (a poor running gag that continues up to the curtain call) and Tully go through the paces of a burgeoning pop career, including such time filler moments as his first time recording in a studio.

They could have made every song matter. Since Tully is the casual lothario, wouldn't it have been fun to give Rachel the blunt pickup line of a number "Why Don't We Get Drunk (And Screw)?" The show already has her switching roles on Tully and seeing their fling as just a one-off bit of fun. They missed the perfect spot for a song that would feel that much fresher being sung by a woman. Similarly, Buffett's wistful "Coast Of Marseilles" (written by Keith Sykes) flits by so quickly in a medley of sorts that it never has the impact it could.

Rachel cares about nature, so the delightful sing-along "One Particular Harbor" shouldn't have been a throw-away at the finale. It should have been a song Tully wrote *for* her, showing Rachel's passion for the planet was his passion as well. What if she were a single mom or he was a single dad and Tully delivered "Little Miss Magic" (a song not in the show) to demonstrate he'd care for a daughter as much as he'd care for her? The possibilities are endless if you treat his songs as numbers to build a story around, rather than hits to mine for punchlines. *Escape To Margaritaville* is a jukebox musical just for Jimmy Buffett fans when they could have created a musical that would turn the rest of the world into Jimmy Buffett fans too.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding they are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 1:03 AM 

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