



THURSDAY, APRIL 25, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

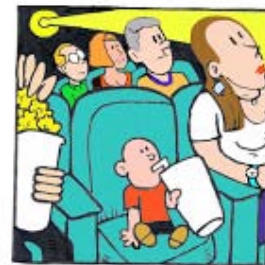
THEATER: 'HADESTOWN' FINDS HEAVEN ON BROADWAY

HADESTOWN *** 1/2 out of ******WALTER KERR THEATRE**

Is *Hadestown* the best new musical on Broadway or the best revival? I've been dying to see this show again since I was blown away by it at New York Theatre Workshop in 2016 (and named it one of the best shows of the year). As far as I was concerned, it was ready for the Great White Way. But Broadway was being gobbled up by *Hamilton* (and the following year by *Dear Evan Hansen*), director Rachel Chavkin was consumed by her similarly bold show *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812* and some show or another was always taking up space at Circle In The Square, the only Broadway venue where this immersive delight made any sense.

So the journey began. Just as Orpheus followed a long, hard road into the underworld to find his love Eurydice, the musical *Hadestown* went from New York to Canada to London, transformed itself into a show with more traditional staging and -- finally! -- returns to New York in triumph. Somehow, this labor of love has proven a box office draw right from the start, much like *Evan Hansen*. Years of anticipation and great reviews will do that for an underdog. Now by all accounts it's certain to battle for Best Musical against *Tootsie*.

That cross-dressing show has old fashioned pizazz (reportedly; I'm seeing it soon), while *Hadestown* has the aura of the cool kid. But *Hadestown* also has the appeal of veterans being showcased like never before, folk beloved in the theater community like Patrick Page as Hades, Amber Gray as Persephone and André De Shields, very dapper in a career capper of a turn as the narrator, Hermes. Combine that talent with a score that may be the richest and most varied since *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* along with a spirit that's both



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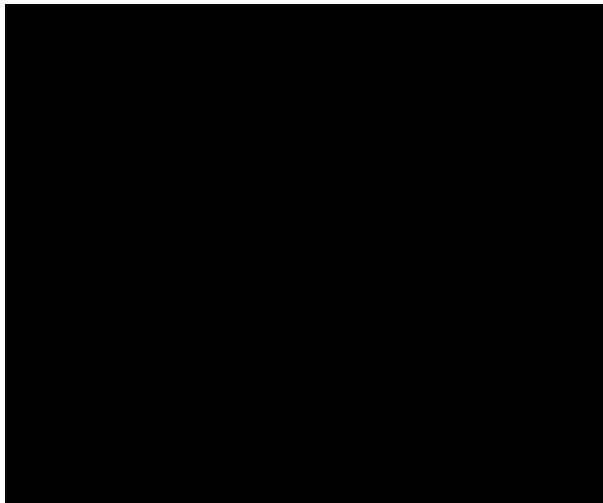
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impassioned and consoling and you've got a potent Tony contender indeed. I need to see the other shows, but if I were placing a bet right now, it would go to the devil.

Come to it fresh and you'll be delighted. It's like a New Orleans funeral, a joyous rendition of a sad, sad story. Hermes is there to paint the picture: an underworld where desperate people sell their souls to the devil in exchange for some "security" -- food to eat, a roof over their heads, a wall to keep out...something. And endless work.

That's of no concern to the young lovers Orpheus (Reeve Carney) and Eurydice (Eva Noblezada). They're enraptured with one another. But Orpheus is working on a song, a tune so powerful it might be able to change the world, to bring nature back into harmony and end the hard, hard times. Eurydice encourages this golden-voiced dreamer but eventually realizes a poet is no provider. He's so focused on the song that Orpheus never hears her hungry cries for help. In desperation, Eurydice makes a deal with the canyon-voiced Hades (a magnetic Page). She's not hungry for riches; she's just hungry.

Almost too late, Orpheus finds out what has happened. He braves the dangerous journey to the underworld and confronts Hades, hoping to free her with his song. As any fan of mythology knows, that song played on his lyre (in this case, a guitar) is so moving that Hades gives the young lovers a chance. They can leave, but Orpheus must go first. Eurydice will follow behind but if he doubts, if he worries, if Orpheus turns around even once before they're above ground, well then the deal is off. Myths don't usually end well and remember what they tell you at the beginning of the show: this is a sad, sad song but they're going to sing it anyway.



In this production, the action is placed mostly in a New Orleans bar, though our expectations about the set will be dismantled before the end of act one. A band on stage makes a raucous noise, dancers strut their stuff, the three Fates offer a sassy chorus and the party really starts when Persephone comes back to the surface for her six months

▼ April (10)

THEATER: "INK" STAINED
WRETCHES GET THEIR
DUE

THEATER: "TOOTSIE" IS A
DRAG

THEATER: "ALL MY SONS"
LACKS A FAMILY

THEATER: "HADESTOWN"
FINDS HEAVEN ON
BROADWAY

THEATER: "BURN THIS"
BARELY SMOLDERS

THEATER: THE PAIN OF "THE
PAIN OF MY
BELLIGERENCE"...

THEATER: QUESTIONING
"SOCRATES"

THEATER: "OKLAHOMA!" IS
OK THE SECOND TIME
AROUND!...

THEATER: LESS IS MORE AT
"MRS. MURRAY'S
MENAGERIE"...

THEATER: "THE CRADLE
WILL ROCK" PUTS YOU TO
SLEEP

► March (5)

► February (1)

► January (5)

► 2018 (33)

► 2017 (6)

► 2016 (2)

► 2015 (17)

► 2014 (2)

► 2013 (5)

► 2012 (17)

► 2011 (15)

► 2010 (10)

► 2009 (43)

► 2008 (86)

► 2007 (781)

► 2006 (2412)

in the sun. (She must come up for air or it would be winter forever.) That sense of community, of sharing a story that has been told and retold for literally thousands of years is the show's calling card. This musical is a celebration, with song after song raising a glass to good times, acknowledging the darkness and the need to struggle, even when you know you're going to lose.

The music, lyrics and book are by Anaïs Mitchell. It began as a concept album long before President Trump took office. So when you hear the song "Why We Build The Wall," don't think it's a timely political comment. It's actually a timeless number about despots using hate and fear to have their way, which makes it all the more chilling. The tune is an Act One show stopper, but there are many more gems, like the raise-the-roof rave "Livin' It Up On Top," the plaintive "Wait For Me," the chilling "Hey, Little Songbird" and of course "Epic," a song that must be moving enough to make you believe it could heal the world and warm the heart of Hades himself. Damned if it doesn't pull that off.

As usual, the young lovers are not nearly as interesting characters as the colorful folk surrounding them. Page has been superlative in inferior shows for years, shows like *Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark* and *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame*. Here, finally, he has a part worthy of his formidable presence and a voice that makes Leonard Cohen sound like a soprano. He's equalled every step of the way by Amber Gray as Persephone, the woman embittered by the fact that their romance has foundered on his obsession with work, with building the Wall and adding more and more factories and more and more workers and more and more misery to his empire. They're joined by André De Shields, who anchors the show with his quiet authority. He is *not* messing around here: every move, every gesture, every tilt of his head is a concise and powerful choice. God help the folks at the Tonys who have to decide who belongs in the Lead and Supporting Actor categories for this show. But however it shakes out, they've all got roles and a show they can cherish for as long as it runs.

Eva Noblezada brings her iron-sheathed vocals to the part of Eurydice, though as with that long-ago NYTW production, I never truly felt her character's desperation. It's just not a role with the stage time or songs to make a great impression, not when the devil gets all the best tunes.

Finally, I should apologize to Damon Daunno, who played Orpheus at that NYTW staging. I thought he made some poor choices, but I'm sure he's happy in the revival of *Oklahoma!* where his sexy charm comes through more clearly. Now that I see Reeve Carney delivering a performance of his own but very much in the same vein, it's clear to me that director Chavkin and creator Mitchell actually *want* Orpheus to be a sort of neutered dreamer. With those songs and his story, Orpheus could be a rabble-rousing union organizer of sorts. Or he could be a passionate lover who burns for Eurydice and will risk it all for her. But they've chosen to make Orpheus an unthreatening, safe

figure, too pretty and wispy to have you imagine he wants to do more than sing to his love or politely comfort the afflicted.

Every choice reinforces this. He wears baggy, pleated pants with a hole or two to indicate he's poor, along with a shirt and a dorky kerchief and suspenders. The effect is to make the rather sexy Carney (he was a superhero after all) as unsexy as possible, more Forrest Gump than Jeff Buckley or god forbid Woody Guthrie. When Eurydice actually grabs his chest and arms in a declaration of love, he pulls back as if freaked out by her touching him. When they finally kiss, she must make the move and it remains more sweet than smoldering. None of this is necessary and the show would be even stronger if they let an actor cut loose in this part. God knows, he's got a killer 11 o'clock number to deliver. But without a genuine anger about injustice or genuine desire for his love, Orpheus remains an indistinct kid with a pretty voice. It's a credit to the strong score and enduring power of the myth that the show works as well as it does.

And work it does. I found myself moved again by the story, the talent on stage, the sad ending and the remarkable way the show turns that tragedy around and makes confronting the fact that things don't always work out both powerful and up-lifting. (Do stay for the entire curtain call. Like most Marvel movies, there's a kicker!)

But the one looming message of *Hadestown* is Broadway's desperate need for more houses, especially black boxes or intimate and funky spaces like Circle In The Square. More and more shows like *The Great Comet* and *Hadestown* and *Fun Home* and *Once On This Island* and so many others are conceived -- brilliantly -- for a space that isn't the traditional one of a proscenium staging. Few can afford to rip up a theater and redo it just for a show, even one as unconventional as *The Great Comet*. And with more and more houses locked up for years (*Harry Potter* isn't going anywhere, is it?), the need for flexible new spaces is tremendous.

Hadestown went to Canada and then London to completely rethink its staging. They've done it but almost every change is unfortunate. With an immersive staging and no fancy tools at their disposal, the sense of people coming together to tell a story was immediate and true. When Orpheus journeyed to the underworld, he crawled over and under and around other actors, wending his through and behind and in front of the audience. You craned your neck to follow him. Now, he just walks on a turntable for a few moments, an effect far less satisfying. Instead of everyone sitting in a circle to hear a story, we're just sitting in the audience -- also less effective. When everyone around you was singing "Why We Build The Wall," it felt like the end of the world. It still works onstage, just not as well. Of course, it's easy to romanticize going to see an unheralded show and being blown away by the talent and the story. Your second time isn't always as fresh. But in fact, similar shows like *Once* and *The Band's Visit* grew even more powerful on Broadway. Sadly, that hasn't happened here. But let me emphasize again, the

lucky few who saw it first can say, "Oh you should have seen it then..." while everyone new to the show will simply tell their friends, "You have to see this now."

So yes, *Hadestown* is still one of the best musicals of the year and the songs will endure. But I can't wait to see the next revival.

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