



THURSDAY, MARCH 29, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: INVITING "LOBBY," COLD "FROZEN," OFF-KEY "ROCKTOPIA"

**LOBBY HERO** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**FROZEN** \*\*

**ROCKTOPIA** \*

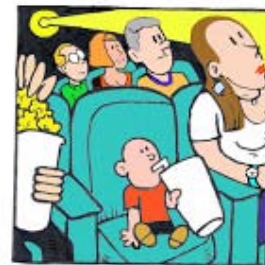
**LOBBY HERO** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

### 2ND STAGE AT THE HELEN HAYES THEATER

Kenneth Lonergan is a good playwright. His plays are shaggy and shambling and perhaps as flawed in modest ways as their characters. But they're *alive* -- plays like *This Is Our Youth* and *Hold On To Me Darling* and *Lobby Hero* and the rest are funny and engaging and bristling with the tension of everyday life.

In *Lobby Hero*, Jeff (Michael Cera) works in the lobby of a New York City apartment building. His boss William (Brian Tyree Henry) swings by each night to chat and check up on Jeff, encouraging the military washout to make something of his life. Jeff can't think much further than the end of his shift, but he is attracted to the pint-sized rookie cop Dawn (Bel Powley). She's partnered with the dickish veteran Bill (Chris Evans) who forces her to linger in the lobby while he dallies with the lady in 22-J.

With almost no fuss, Lonergan creates a compelling drama. William confides that his loser brother needs an alibi for a horrific crime the cops are pinning on him. A principled man, William hates lying but knows his brother is the perfect fall guy. And he's almost certain his brother had nothing to do with it. Almost. Dawn is trapped by an altercation with a drunk that led to the man's hospitalization. She needs the favorable testimony of Bill for the inquiry to follow...and Bill wants her to return the favor with favors. And Jeff? Well, Jeff has to



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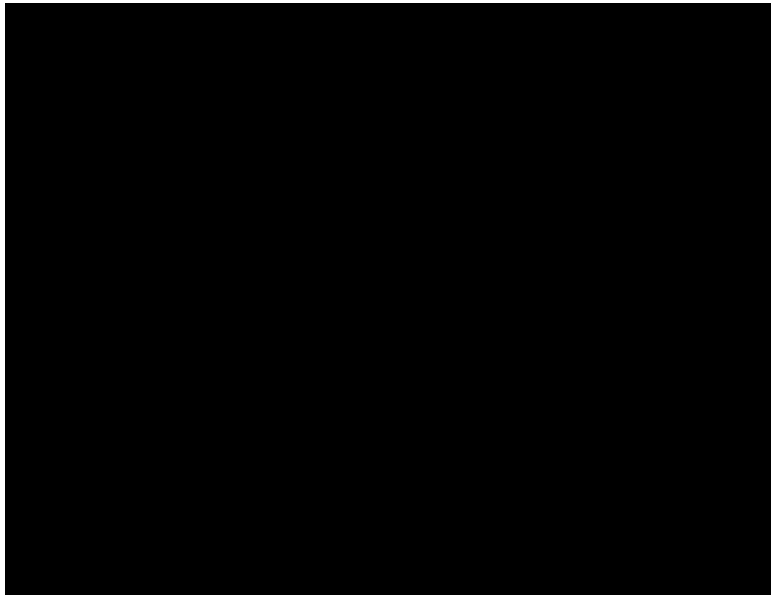
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decide if telling the truth is the right thing to do or just an easy way to win over Dawn.

2second Stage was built on taking a second look at plays and this is a more satisfying revival than the Tony-nominated production of *This Is Our Youth* from 2015. I was lucky enough to see the original production of *Lobby Hero*, featuring a memorably quirky Glenn Fitzgerald Off Broadway. Here it is again, on Broadway this time, with Cera as a slightly more sad sack version of the same lonely lobby attendant.



The play is as delightful as I remember, offering up four colorful roles, lots of humor and proving a little more elegant in its construction than I recalled. (Everyone lies in ways large and small -- especially to themselves -- but Lonergan doesn't make a big deal of this.) Is it revealed as a masterpiece? No, but any show with four roles that can give four actors the chance to dig into parts as satisfying as these deserves to be revived again and again. David Rockwell's deceptively simple set design includes an open-air assemblage of walls and doors that allows the show to switch easily from inside to outside without calling attention to itself -- it's a set that admirably keeps the cast front and center from start to finish. That cast is ably led by the naturalistic direction of Trip Cullman, doing some of his best work.

Chris Evans is the headline here, making his Broadway debut. He has star power on film, from *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (the best of the recent Marvel movies) to *Snowpiercer* and other more offbeat projects. But can he conquer the stage? Easily. I don't know who to credit for his haircut and mustache but they alone makes you understand this is not a guy to trust. Yet it's not just his outward appearance that convinces -- that's not enough on stage, any more than a dashing figure means you can pull off a stalwart if conflicted hero on film. Evans convinces completely, making the whipsaw

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changes in this self-regarding, self-justifying cop very amusing and a little scary. It's one of the show's sneaky triumphs that we accept the contradictory Bill, who can be selfish and selfless in almost the same breath.

Yet, he's just part of the story. Brian Tyree Henry is exceptional as the no-nonsense William. His slow-burn over Jeff's nonsense, his anguish over his brother and his desire to stay true to his code without ignoring the realities of the world around him are a treat to behold. That's no surprise to anyone who has seen him in shows like *The Brother/Sister Plays* or *Fortress Of Solitude* and it's even less of a surprise to see his growing and impressive credits on film and TV.

Michael Cera proves his strong turn in *This Is Our Youth* was no fluke either. A very winning and quirky presence on film and TV, Cera is just as quietly charming on stage, from his dead-pan humor to his yearning for a little human sympathy.

But it's Bel Powley I'll remember most. She is sensational in the film *The Diary of A Teenage Girl* and back in 2011 she made a lovely Broadway debut in a sterling revival of *Arcadia*. Now here she is, so tiny and pugnacious and vulnerable and sweet and just a little too loud as the rookie Dawn.

Powley's eyes are racoon-sized as she swivels from hurt to anger to tender appreciation, ping-ponged this way and that by the mercurial untrustworthiness of a cop she desperately needs to believe in. Barking out some lines, mumbling others, painfully obvious as she tries to tamp down her pain or confusion -- Powley does it all here with terrific stage presence, great control of her voice and fully mining the inevitable moment when Dawn unleashes her anger.

And that's why you revive such a solid play by Lonergan. It doesn't suddenly reveal itself as a Major Work Of Drama, but it has riches that good actors can mine again and again. I'm not sure why Lonergan is a good playwright but a great filmmaker. After all, his strength is with words and characters, not visuals. But I'd hate to lose him in either field and this impeccable revival is all the explanation you need.

**FROZEN \*\***

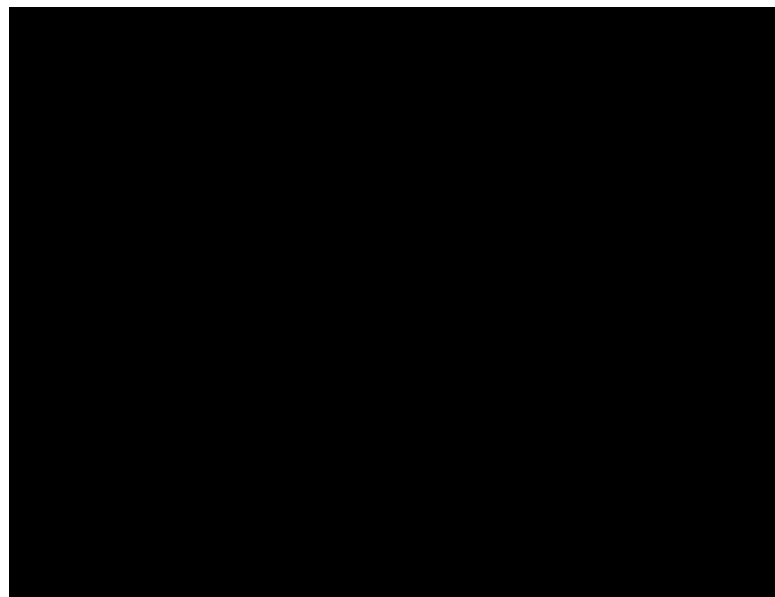
**ST. JAMES THEATRE**

Disney has a remarkable track record on Broadway. They've opened seven shows and five of them have been smash hits. Those five have been nominated for Best Musical, with *The Lion King* winning the top prize. And though they sometimes get it right, Disney has also proven willing to tinker and tinker again until they make a show better. *Newsies* was an experiment that leaped directly to Broadway. But *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame* has proven a harder nut to crack, getting mounted again and again all over the world but never getting the

green-light for that final test. *Aladdin* needed two times at bat in regional theaters before they nailed it. And though *The Little Mermaid* has already come and gone on Broadway, they're still trying to make it work. (God knows the score needs no help -- it's terrific.) Now comes their eighth show -- and *Frozen* looks set to run for at least two years on the momentum of the film alone.

Better than anyone, Disney knows that theater doesn't have a formula. A great film like *Tarzan* or *The Little Mermaid* can prove very difficult to transfer to the stage. Sometimes being faithful pays off for fans if not critics (*Beauty and the Beast*); sometimes a show can improve on a film (*Newsies*) and sometimes it has to go in an entirely new direction (*Aladdin*). Look at their work in theater and one thing is clear: Disney will take chances, Disney will tinker and Disney can be bold.

Unfortunately, none of that applies to *Frozen*. Perhaps the film was so successful they figured, why fix what ain't broke? Out of town, they reportedly considered a darker take on the story of two sisters who are separated by magic and misunderstanding. That's gone and what remains is a dutiful adaptation, with the same modest book, new songs weakening an already thin batch of tunes and the expensive yet somehow underwhelming sets recreating moments from the film rather than reimagining them. The story is by Jennifer Lee, who also wrote and co-directed the animated film. And the professional if not passionate direction is by Michael Grandage. *Frozen* will surely prove the first stop for parents with little girls who have already seen *Wicked* (and even those who haven't). It won't get the cold shoulder from initial audiences but one doubts repeat business or word of mouth will be nearly as strong as expected.



Refreshingly, the princesses are front and center in *Frozen* and neither the main storyline nor the climactic action depend on guys: *Frozen* is

girl power from beginning to end. Princess Elsa's power is a magical sort she can barely control. And when a spell gone awry almost kills her beloved younger sister Anna, the king and queen urge their gifted daughter to keep her powers tamped down. They lock her away from her sister, close the doors to the castle and hope for the best. But everyone knows your true nature can't be denied. When the parents die at sea, Elsa becomes the new ruler of their kingdom and unintentionally creates havoc with her icy skills: their land is plunged into an endless winter while Elsa flees to a mountain hide-away. Anna rushes after to save her, helped along by a magical snowman and a friendly guide. Oh, and they sing "Let It Go."

As with the film, the first 20 or so minutes of the show are the strongest. Two little girls play together late at night, with Elsa innocently urged on by Anna to display her powers. Near-tragedy is averted, Elsa is shut away and before you know it she's getting crowned Queen and Anna is meeting a really cute prince from the Southern Isles. The action here is elevated by the two best songs: the adorable "Do You Want To Build A Snowman?" and the blossoming romance number "Love Is An Open Door." The latter is head and shoulders above the rest of the songs by Kristen Anderson-Lopez and her husband Robert. In it, the goofily endearing Anna and the goofily endearing Prince Hans finish each other's sentences, top one another via a melody that continually ups the ante with key changes and otherwise captures people falling in love with the economy and precision of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

But it's fairly downhill from there, despite a game cast. The many problems of the film's book remain: the villain of the piece is a last-minute reveal that feels like a cheat. And this production reduces the role of the secondary villain (Robert Creighton), making Anna's mockery of his height seem petty and frankly out of place in a show that celebrates difference. (And his last-minute reversal to non-villain seems equally abrupt and unsatisfying.)

This adaptation might have easily revealed the villain sooner or at least made Hans more complex. And its weird fear of Elsa needed real fixing. Her mother is clearly the source of Elsa's magic. And they call on the Hidden Folk for help when that sorcery goes awry. So why exactly don't they ask for help in training Elsa to control it? At the very least, it would have been nice to try. Instead we have a timidly faithful reproduction of a flawed film.

That leaves the stage magic. One hoped there at least *Frozen* would shine. Instead the scenic and costume designs by Christopher Oram mostly disappoint. The costumes are fine (though I kept expecting the villagers to burst into songs from *The Sound Of Music*) and Elsa's quick-change when she bursts out of her shell garners cheers. But the real castle, the ice castle and the icy barriers that spring up during action scenes are thoroughly disappointing. Poor Elsa waves her hands around...and video projections dimly suggest the proscenium of the

stage being iced over. At the climax those video projections...extend a few feet into the auditorium. The stakes on Broadway have been raised too high for that. You expect to be in a wintry wonderland the moment you step into the theater and that just doesn't happen.

Worst of all, the magical Hidden Folk are poorly conceived and executed on every level: they look like "primitive" cavemen and women, except for the tails that feel added on to suggest they're creatures rather than humans. Their leader has washboard abs, their hair is vaguely Rastafarian and it all seems more *Clan of the Cave Bear* than the (also poorly conceived) rock creatures of the film.

On the bright side, the cast is solid and makes the most of what they're given. The young Elsa and Anna along with the King and Queen score warmly. In much bigger roles, both John Riddle and Jelani Alladin are appealing as Hans and Kristof, competitors for Anna's heart. Kevin Del Aguila has fun with the most welcome addition to the score: the second act opener "Hygge." It doesn't quite land as the show stopper you want (body stockings for the playfully almost-nude chorus line are weirdly distracting) but it's a breath of fresh air anyway. And the show's decisions on how to portray the reindeer Sven (Andrew Pirozzi, who hopefully has a world-class chiropractor) and the snowman Olaf (Greg Hildreth) are spot-on. Sven is just a guy in a costume, but it works very well. And having Hildreth manipulate the puppet Olaf in full view is ideal. Even better, he captures the whimsy of Josh Gad's vocal performance without going as over-the-top. It's true in spirit, but Hildreth manages to put his own spin on the film's best element.

As the two sisters, our leads also do their best. Caissie Levy has the far less fun role of the tortured Elsa, though she does get to belt out that iron-plated hit "Let It Go" with iron lungs at the end of act one. But Patti Murin has the much better part of Anna and scores very nicely. Even though I caught her on an off night vocally (she had to cancel a performance due to bronchitis soon after), Murin was quite winning. Truly, there's nothing wrong with any performance or any element of this live action version of *Frozen*. There's just nothing terribly right about it either. Magic can be dangerous, but boy do you miss it when it's not there.

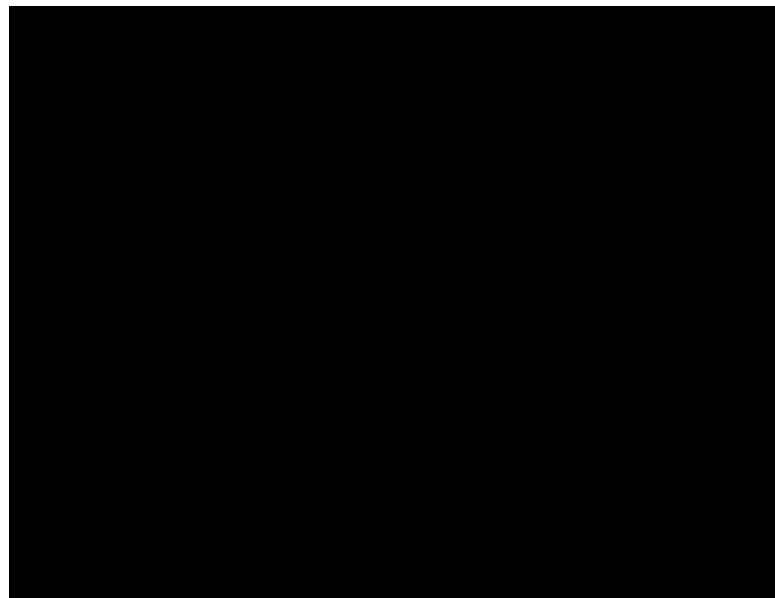
## **ROCKTOPIA \***

### **THE BROADWAY THEATRE**

Honestly, I had no idea what to expect. I thought *Rocktopia* was just "classic rock songs backed by a full-ish orchestra," a show popping onto Broadway for a few weeks before heading back out on tour. I knew Pat Monahan from Train would be a guest star on a few songs and that Robin Zander of Cheap Trick and Dee Snider of Twisted Sister were booked to guest star later in the run. I didn't realize it was a spin on the successful touring acts Trans-Siberian Orchestra and Mannheim Steamroller. Those stadium-friendly shows combine

souped-up covers and originals (mostly rock and classical for the first, mostly holiday songs and classical for the second) with splashy pyrotechnics and top-notch visual/audio pizzazz. And I really wasn't prepared for mash-ups of classical music with Elton John, the tired observation that Beethoven was the rock star of his day or the giddy kitsch of hearing Queen's "We Are The Champions" being performed while a parade of heroes like Abraham Lincoln and Anne Frank are displayed on video screens. No, seriously, Anne Frank! It was silly, it was sad, it was by no means good but I won't forget it.

I want to say it's a cut-rate version of what TSO does on tour, but I don't really know, having never seen TSO on tour. I also want to say the idea that there's an audience for a mash-up of classical music and classic rock is deeply misguided. People who love classical music and opera are surely not waiting around to hear very poor versions of war horses like "Nessun Dorma." And people who love Led Zeppelin and the Who presumably don't pause *Houses Of The Holy* and say, "You know what I really want to hear right now? Puccini!" But I am wrong, as the grosses of TSO and Mannheim Steamroller can attest year after year. The same is apparently true for *Rocktopia*. The dude next to me sighed with pleasure when the opening strains of Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir" were heard and seemed just as happy in a way when Máiréad Nesbitt of Celtic Woman appeared on stage looking like a white witch and sawed away on her violin. (How *does* she keep her hair from getting tangled up with the strings and the bow?) And the show grossed an astonishing (to me) \$800,000 on Broadway last week, which I would bet the house is less than their operating costs. People really DO want to hear Stravinsky's "The Rite Of Spring" ...as long as it's followed by "Purple Haze." Who the hell knew? Well, co-creators Rob Evan and Randall Craig Fleischer, that's who. They and the audience really don't care if I and other critics sneer.



And sneer we must. Act One begins with the theme song from the

movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a tune snobs might refer to as "Also Sprach Zarathustra" by Strauss. That garnered one of the show's many moments of sheer nuttiness. Conductor and co-creator Fleischer comes out in the usual conductor's outfit, though it has a ratty, rock and roll vibe to it. He begins conducting the musicians...and the taped recordings clearly augmenting the show's sound. Hey, it's not the first Broadway show to do that but there is something hilariously off-key about a conductor leading machines in a fanfare. I'd like to think there's a moment in the show where Fleischer is conducting ONLY taped recordings but I don't believe it actually happened.

It doesn't get any better unless you have a taste for kitsch, in which case it most surely does get much better indeed. Act One's songs are backed by video projections that seem drawn entirely from public domain footage -- it looks like the videos randomly generated by karaoke machines when you sing in a bar -- beaches, deserts, rainbows and the like That gives us a two-fer of sorts: Handel's heartbreaking "Lascia Ch'io Pianga" is sung while images of flowers opening to spring are displayed, making it seem as if one of the saddest songs ever written is a happy number about new love. In a remarkable coincidence, this 1705 number was being performed on Broadway in not one but TWO different Broadway shows, since Mark Rylance's *Farinelli and the King* was in its final week. That surely will never ever happen again in history.

I won't soon forget the finale, where Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" was mashed up to delirious, absurd effect with Beethoven's "Ode To Joy." But the best moments were human and unscripted.

The backup singers are recruited locally in each city and placed on a platform above the action. They are a ragtag group of people and seem so unrehearsed it gave their presence a compellingly random vibe. A guy on the right in the back row seemed to run out of steam and leaned on a rail to rest every once in a while. A cute young guy on the left looked as if he woke up from a dream, found himself suddenly on a Broadway stage and gamely tried to sing and boogie along with everyone else while wondering exactly what the hell was going on. In stark and wonderful contrast, the backup singer in the front row on the right (stage left) was a woman with blond hair and a bustier-style outfit that was music video ready. This gal is making the most of her moment. She was focused and in character the entire evening: every time you looked over at her she was pumping her fists and singing along and acting as if she'd never had more fun in her entire life. When a female singer onstage was vocalizing, this woman had a look of admiration and respect as if to say, "Wow, this person is amazing!" But deep down you knew she was really thinking, "I should be the one on stage and SHE should be up here and someday soon that's exactly what's going to happen!" I loved her.

Even better was the opening moment when co-creator Rob Evan came out to belt Styx's "Come Sail Away"...only to realize his microphone



was dead. The audience --so primed to sing along you'd swear they were British -- delivered the words all the louder as he urged them on. A new mike was trotted out and he laughed off the flub, saying, "It's live theater!" and they cheered all the louder. Towards the end, Pat Monahan finished his lines from "Nessun Dorma." Yes, Pat Monahan of Train has a stab at opera. Why not? He finished, exhaled and smiled as if to say, "Hey! I got through it!" and you sort of had to smile along with him. It was sweet and genuine and real and of course it only lasted a moment.

## THEATER OF 2018

Homelife/The Zoo Story (at Signature) \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

[Escape To Margaritaville](#) \*\*

Broadway By The Year: 1947 and 1966 \*\*\*

Lobby Hero \*\*\*

Frozen \*\*

Rocktopia \*

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POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 5:56 PM 

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