



FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 09, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: A Musical "King Kong?" Bananas! "American Son" Bores

KING KONG * out of ****
BROADWAY THEATRE

Yes, they did a great job with the giant ape.

No, the spectacle of *King Kong* the technical achievement does not make the show worth a peek. Sure, maybe you were happy to sit through *Titanic* to watch the boat sink or endured the absurd story of *Avatar* to savor the cutting edge 3-D effects. But much as I love puppetry, that spectacle for its own sake argument does not hold true here.

And no, kids would be bored out of their minds.

Unless you or someone you love is really, really nuts about puppetry (which I am) or is so into Kong they can happily discuss the 1976 version as compared to the 2005 version or wax eloquent over *King Kong Vs. Godzilla*, then...no. I mean, if they're even aware of the Rankin/Bass TV series *The King Kong Show* (three seasons!) and the sequel to the classic original that came out literally MONTHS later way back in 1933 (*The Son Of Kong*), well, then they already have their tickets and didn't wait and can properly lower their expectations.

Other than that...no.

Now back to the good news. They *really* did a terrific, ground-breaking job with the character of King Kong, a combination of on-stage puppeteers, remote controlled manipulators and backstage actors voicing the creatures grunts and bellows. As with *The Lion King*, you soon ignore the artists making it happen (except when it's really fun to do so) and just watch the character. It's no diss on the other actors to say Kong gives the best performance of the show -- you feel actual empathy for the creature and every all-too-brief moment



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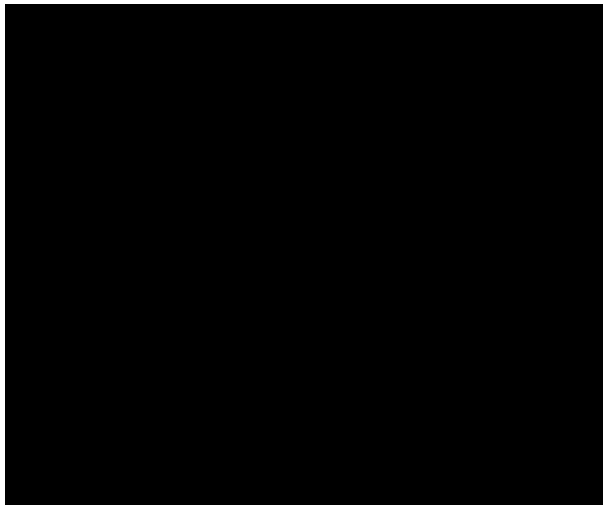
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when he is center stage and interacting with others finds the audience pin-drop quiet and engaged. Let me emphasize again, it's not so magical that this makes a trip to King Kong worth the visit, but it's a genuine achievement nonetheless.

Of such things are special Tony Awards created and Kong would be a worthy recipient. Plus, who would want to tell Kong he LOST an award? Best to make it a sure thing and announce the award far in advance. Beyond that, it would be wise for the highly competitive theme park impresarios to check this out. Their theme parks often employ giant mechanized creatures and the approach taken here probably isn't any cheaper but it sure as heck is far more satisfying creatively and emotionally. The Kong of theme parks is just a stunt; this Kong lets you MEET the beast and sense his emotions, his intelligence, his fearsomeness. If there's one electric moment in King Kong, it's the scene where Kong has broken free of his chains on Broadway and then lumbers out to the edge of the stage, finally acknowledging us the audience and looming over the front rows, eyeing the orchestra seat members like a tasty snack. A ripple of amused tension spreads throughout the crowd as Kong breaks the fourth wall. I doubt there's anything as convincing in any theme park anywhere.



The tortured history of this punchline of a show waiting to happen (*King Kong?* The MUSICAL?) is well-documented. Still, what has arrived on Broadway directed and choreographed by Drew McOnie made some smart choices. It kept the Depression America setting to capture the desperation of a two-bit film director/impresario named Carl Denham (Eric William Morris). He has a cockamamie idea to head to an uncharted spit of land dubbed Skull Island, drag along a leading lady and capture...*something* with his footage. He stumbles across would-be actress Ann Darrow (Christiani Pitts), likes her spunk and they roll the dice. Of course, when they find King Kong, Denham decides instead of capturing something on film he'd rather capture the beast itself, bring it back to New York and get rich a la P.T. Barnum. Things go wrong.

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THEATER: The Irresistible Raul
Esparza in "Arturo ...

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Kong?" Bananas!
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In this version, the natives looking to sacrifice a blond beauty to their god Kong are well forgotten. Instead, Ann Darrow is black, which immediately erases -- or at least minimizes -- all sorts of racial stereotypes embedded in the original scenario. Further, this Ann Darrow is no Fay Wray shrinking violet known only for her screams. She's more likely to save herself, thank you very much and her scream is more of a roar that Kong himself might identify with. (In one of the show's many misbegotten technical choices, Ann's roar is a pre-taped bit of nonsense that takes you out of the show every time they employ it.)

That's all well and good, but the show goes way too far. Ann isn't just a competent gal, she's a striver who becomes self-actualized by her bonding with Kong. Towards the end of the play, she's actually telling the big fella he's made her a better person; God bless Pitts for delivering such tripe without rolling her eyes at the same time.

And MILD SPOILER ALERT, she actually encourages Kong to break free in New York (because what could go wrong?), *jumps on his back* and they ride off together to Central Park. One can easily imagine Ann feeling sympathy for the creature and suffering guilt for seeing him chained up and miserable. But actually getting within arms reach, much less climbing on his back as a willing partner in crime? We actually believe in the creature too much to buy such nonsense. Kong could have easily grabbed Ann of his own volition and taken her to the top of the Empire State Building without undercutting Ann's agency, thank you very much. END OF SPOILER ALERT

Finally, the show was right to understand the spectacle of Kong needed a full orchestra and a genuine score (Marius de Vries) to make it work. What the show most definitely didn't need, however, were songs by Eddie Perfect or anyone frankly. Since none of them work -- at all -- and the only decent scenes are the dramatic ones, it's a shame after scrapping two complete versions they didn't just say to hell with the tunes.

Much else does not work. The digital backdrops employed throughout the show do fine when trying to give a sense of excitement as Kong races through the jungle or the streets of New York. Otherwise, they're murky and kind of ugly, somehow, as if the Depression setting meant the visuals had to be dark and depressing and murky too. The transformation from the streets of New York to the bow of the ship is so clumsily handled by director McOnie it made me appreciate how smoothly such things are often achieved by others. (I kept thinking, Why are the two leads standing on a box and being pushed around the stage or Why are the sailors surrounding the two leads with a bunch of ropes, rather than simply enjoying as one should as one image flowed into another and the boat magically appeared.) The jungle is goofily unconvincing (green lasers certainly don't help), though Kong's lair (or rather, penthouse with a great view) works fine.

While Kong is impressive, clearly every penny went to him. A battle with a giant serpent is deeply disappointing for two reasons. One, the giant serpent isn't terribly convincing. Two, as they face off, Kong and the serpent sort of wander off stage for their climactic showdown because it was too difficult or expensive to stage the fight in front of the audience who dearly would have enjoyed seeing it. This isn't just a cost-saving; it cheats the audience out of the necessary sight of Kong's fearsome power and it happens at a few key moments. Most of the big action happens offstage, though the planes shooting at Kong above the Empire State Building is a nice image. The result is that he's a lot less fearsome than he might have been.

The book by Jack Thorne is weak and does a poor job of making up its mind about that impresario Carl Denham. Is he the villain? Does he turn bad or make the wrong choice at certain impulsive moments? The show has no idea and so neither do we and a chance for a genuine hiss-able foil (or at minimum a flesh and blood character) is lost. It's so clumsy in dealing with the two leads that the only notable (but brief) moments of actual drama involve Lumpy. Who you might well ask is Lumpy? Lumpy (Erik Lochtefeld) is Denham's assistant, a sad sack fellow who has perhaps the only substantial speeches of the show -- in one he gives Ann the spine to stand up to Denham and in another he quits his job. They almost sort of work, leaving you with the feeling that if they'd dumped the godawful songs and actually had some more scenes that this nonsense might have sorted itself out a little. No such luck.

AMERICAN SON * 1/2

BOOTH THEATRE

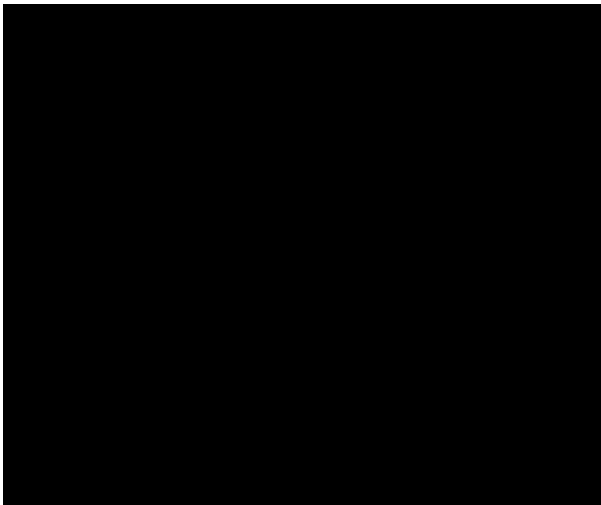
This drama by Christopher Demos-Brown is the second work on Broadway that feels like a throw-back to the good ole days. Like *Lifespan Of A Fact*, it's a topical entertainment with some big stars and something on its mind. In this case, it's the sadly perennial topic of racism in America, the dangers young black men face on a daily basis and the constant hum of tension felt by their parents at all hours of the day and night but especially at night and especially at 4 am when their son hasn't come home yet and they can't reach them on the phone.

That's the nerve-fraying situation of Kendra (Kerry Washington) when the play opens. It's 4 am, it's raining and she's pacing around an anonymous waiting area of a Miami Florida police station where a new but clueless cop (Jeremy Jordan) tries to placate Kendra despite his inability to tell her much of anything about her son. They know the car he was driving was involved in an incident, but other than that he knows just as little as she does and Kendra is just going to have to calm down until the public affairs officer shows up and can give her more help. Uh-huh.

When Kendra's estranged husband Scott shows up (Steven Pasquale)

and we discover he's a white FBI agent, you can easily map out the rest of the action in this tepid, ripped from the headlines work. Sadly, nothing surprises in the least, right down to the unsurprising surprise ending. *American Son* is earnest, well-intentioned and inert, even with four strong actors ready to give it their all. It's not enough, just as it wasn't enough for the similarly bland *Lifespan Of A Fact*, which desperately tried to add a little timeliness to its tale of fact-checking by making allusions to our supposed post-truth era.

Do such plays simply not work on Broadway? Is TV where they belong? I'd say, no, not really. They just need to be done well. And with TV tackling such stories with a hell of a lot of integrity and smarts, the bar has raised. A show like *American Son* might have been the only game in town in 1950. Today, it just feels played out. All director Kenny Leon and his sterling cast could really have done in the situation was take a pass or demanded more.



The first problem is that *American Son* takes place in real time. In the old days, that might have created some tension. Instead, it creates an artificial aura around the entire show. Plus, audiences are too savvy. We know in real life how even an incompetent police station in Miami would have handled the situation we always assume is playing out and it isn't by having a distraught mom handled in bungling fashion by a newbie who doesn't know the first thing about preventing a bad situation from getting worse. Further, when the drama takes place in real time, it makes it all the harder to accept that Kendra and Scott -- who are separated and likely never to reunite -- would be desperately worried about their son and yet take time to share anecdotes about the first time they met, hash over old memories and the like. It's the sort of artificiality drama used to traffic in without thinking but is much harder to pull off now.

Among the many other problems is the core relationship between the two adults. Scott has left Kendra, is sleeping with another woman and if they're not already divorced, they surely will be. (The timing of when he left the marriage was a little murky for me as I watched the show.)

As the clunky text brings up everything from baggy pants and corn rows on young black men to the dangers men of color face every single day of their life, the idea that Kendra and Scott were married for 15+ years becomes increasingly difficult to believe.

If their nightmare of a situation (her son is missing) was taking place on a date these two people were on, I'd believe it. But instead they were in love and Scott has been married to Kendra and raised their son with love and affection and presumably at least a modicum of intelligence? Not buying it. Scott has to be lectured to about what can happen to his son? You mean, this FBI agent has never had the "talk" with his son, the one where he must acknowledge his son literally can't casually run down a street for any reason without endangering his life? Scott can't even bring himself to call his own son by the name they chose, Jamal? Scott is so focused on having Jamal -- or "J" as he would say -- getting into West Point and having every "advantage" that he hasn't clued himself in to the need for his son to celebrate and appreciate and accept the color of his own skin? Scott uses the word "uppity" and he's not even being ironic to make a point? And college professor Kendra *married* him? I don't even think they would have made it to the third date. It is impossible to believe the relationship at the heart of this play and thus it's hard to believe anything else either.

Nonetheless, the set by Derek McLane is a solid, unprepossessing work that does what it must and then gets out of the way. Washington and Pasquale do what they can with their roles, just as Jeremy Jordan does with a cop who of course makes a casually racist comment the moment Kendra is out of the room and is so dumb he confuses Emily Dickinson with Charles Dickens and so sexist he tells this highly educated college professor he believes she is wrong when she corrects him.

Then Eugene Lee walks in. When a stodgy play like *American Son* begins by saying someone is going to show up later, you just know they're going to show up later and set off some fireworks, upending the dynamics of everything that has gone on before. That's precisely what happens. Lt. John Stokes (Lee) walks in and asserts his authority. The marvelous Lee (a mainstay of August Wilson productions, the legendary original cast of *A Soldier's Play* in 1982 and the TV show *Homicide: Life On The Streets* among many others) strolls in, pickpockets all the attention and never let's it go.

It's a pity to report that the godawful final scene is wholly unbelievable, tiresomely predictable, rests on Lee's shoulders...and he flubbed a key line. It was momentary and nothing really and even the performance of a lifetime wouldn't have made the scene good, but it happened. It's poorly staged by Leon (why is the character standing and addressing the audience with his back to the other characters) and even more poorly written by Demos-Brown (we are all too aware that the level of detail offered in the scene simply wouldn't be available at that stage). Even a talent like Lee can be tripped up by a flimsy piece

and that's precisely what *American Son* remains from start to finish.

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 *

Angels in America ** 1/2

Mean Girls ** 1/2

The Sting **

Mlima's Tale ** 1/2

Children Of A Lesser God ** 1/2

Sancho: An Act Of Remembrance ** 1/2

The Metromaniacs ***

Summer: The Donna Summer Musical *

The Seafarer **

Henry V (Public Mobile Unit w Zenzi Williams) * 1/2

Saint Joan **

Travesties *** 1/2

Summer and Smoke ** 1/2

My Fair Lady ** 1/2

Broadway By The Year: 1956 and 1975 ** 1/2

Bernhard/Hamlet * 1/2

On Beckett ***

What The Constitution Means To Me **

The Winning Side *

Oklahoma **

Mother Of The Maid *

Love's Labour's Lost ** 1/2

The Lifespan of a Fact **

India Pale Ale *

Thunderbodies ***

The Ferryman *** 1/2

[Eve's Song](#) *

King Kong *

American Son * 1/2

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