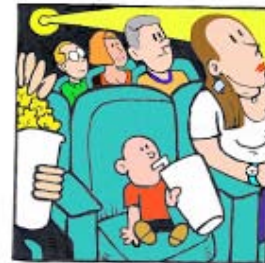




WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: 'Fact' Vs Fiction; Pale "India"

THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT ** out of ******INDIA PALE ALE** * out of ******THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT** ** out of ******STUDIO 54**

Boy, was I amused and intrigued by the prospect of a Broadway play starring Daniel Radcliffe as a fact checker at a magazine. I began my (modest) career working as a fact checker at *Premiere* magazine. And not since the glory days of Michael J. Fox coking it up in *Bright Lights, Big City* and the sitcom *Herman's Head* has fact checking had such a glorious presentation in pop culture.

As an example of how fact checking works, the play is absurd. But that's no criticism, or at least not an observation that matters in the least. Plays (and films and TV shows and so on) about hospitals, cops, lawyers or whatever are almost never "accurate." If residents at a hospital had as much sex on the job as the folks on *Grey's Anatomy*, it would be a miracle if any patient survived.

Instead, let me treat *The Lifespan Of A Fact* as the light entertainment it is -- as such, it's thin stuff, elevated mostly by a cast that is far superior to the material at hand. If there's any surprise, it's that Radcliffe doesn't just hold his own with Bobby Cannavale and Cherry Jones. No, he practically wipes the floor with them.

Radcliffe has grown tremendously as an actor, choosing roles wisely, developing confidence and building up his skills film by film, tv role by tv role and play by play. (Or musical!) True, in this brisk undemanding work by the team of Jeremy Kareken and* David Murrell as well as

Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in NYC and can be reached at mgiltz@pipeline.com

FAVORITE LINKS

[Americablog](#)[Five O'Clock Lightning baseball blog](#)[Deep Pop -- Lori Lakin's Blog](#)[The Back Page -- Jason Page on ESPN Radio](#)[Cine-Blog -- George Robinson's Blog](#)[Documents On Art & Cinema - Daryl Chin's Blog](#)[Brucie G's Wondrous Blog Of Adventure and Mystery -- Bruce Greenspan's Blog](#)

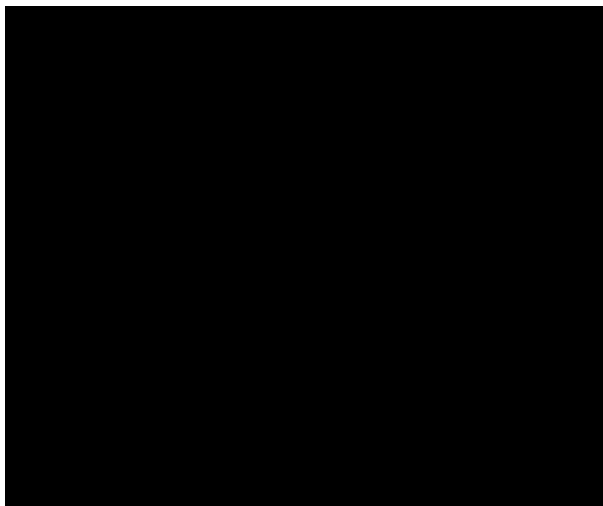
BLOG ARCHIVE

► [2019](#) (7)▼ [2018](#) (34)► [December](#) (7)

Gordon Farrell, none of the roles are fleshed out in the least. We leave the play barely knowing who they are. Nonetheless, Radcliffe's role has the most stage time and the zingiest lines and he makes the most of it, with a spot-on American accent and a passionate focus. Or maybe I'm just inherently on the side of the fact checker.

In the play, Jim (Radcliffe) is a Harvard grad eager to make his mark at a New York magazine. When top editor Emily (Jones) asks for a volunteer to work over the weekend and fact check a major essay by heavyweight writer John (Cannavale), well Jim eagerly raises his hand. He's done some fact checking during college but has never fact checked a piece at the magazine before.

Keep in mind, this essay --which begins with the suicide of a young man in Las Vegas -- is getting crashed into the new issue because Emily believes it's an award-winning, remarkable work that will make waves and garner all sorts of attention. So she needs the work done very quickly (Jim only has a few days -- including the weekend) and it MUST be done by Monday morning so the issue can go to press.



Jim wants to impress and goes whole hog, developing a spread sheet to cover all the relevant information, discrepancies and the like. The writer turned just one handwritten page of notes for his fifteen page essay. Jim soon creates a mountain of paperwork about ten times as big as the article itself. Phone calls to the writer don't go well. Jim keeps pointing out fact errors such as the number of licensed strip clubs in Las Vegas and the writer refuses to change it. Why? Because he likes the sound of the number he uses more than the actual fact. The color of bricks outside the hotel where the kid jumped? They're brown, but to the writer John they looked red. And "red" is better than brown because red is the color of blood. A bottle of tabasco sauce was unearthed beneath a certain bar, but John uses the name of the bar next door because it's called Buckets of Blood! That's a hell of a lot more evocative, isn't it? Yes, but it's not RIGHT. It's wrong. And Jim can't let go.

- ▶ [November](#) (4)
 - ▼ [October](#) (6)
 - [THEATER: "Thunderbodies!" and the Glorious Mess of...](#)
 - [THEATER: 'Fact' Vs Fiction; Pale "India"](#)
 - [THEATER: "Love's Labour's Lost"...But A Good Meal ...](#)
 - [THEATER: "Mother Of The Maid" Lacks Fire](#)
 - [THEATER: "Oklahoma" Is \(Just\) OK](#)
 - [THEATER: Bill Irwin Clowns \(A Little\), The Constit...](#)
 - ▶ [September](#) (1)
 - ▶ [May](#) (5)
 - ▶ [April](#) (6)
 - ▶ [March](#) (4)
 - ▶ [February](#) (1)
 - ▶ [2017](#) (6)
 - ▶ [2016](#) (2)
 - ▶ [2015](#) (14)
 - ▶ [2014](#) (2)
 - ▶ [2013](#) (5)
 - ▶ [2012](#) (18)
 - ▶ [2011](#) (15)
 - ▶ [2010](#) (10)
 - ▶ [2009](#) (43)
 - ▶ [2008](#) (86)
 - ▶ [2007](#) (781)
 - ▶ [2006](#) (2412)
 - ▶ [2005](#) (5)
-

Before you know it, Jim has flown out to Las Vegas to check more facts on the ground, John is strangling him in frustration and Emily flies out to see if she can rescue this piece from fact-checking hell without ruining the integrity of her magazine. (Needless to say, as a fact checker in real life, I never cached any flier miles.)

Every once in a while the play threatens to reveal something about one of its three characters. Yet at the end, I don't think we really even know if any of them are gay or straight or anything in between, married or single, lonely or happy, dog lovers or cat fanciers, liberal or conservative or any of the other myriad details one might use to at least *begin* to define a person.

Sure, there's a suggestion that John comes from a hardscrabble background and Jim is privileged. (Harvard and all that.) But was Jim a legacy or did he go on a scholarship? John hints at Jim's higher socio-economic status but that goes nowhere too. It seems crazy that Jim just flew across the country on his own dime to fact check an article. But Jim may have already purchased that ticket to Vegas for a personal event. So if John challenged him on having the ability to jump on a plane on a whim, Jim might have responded that it cost pretty much everything he had and maybe he's living on a friend's couch in NYC because the internship at the magazine doesn't pay anything and he's got six figures of student loan debt and no idea how he's going to pay it. Or he might have 'fessed up to being wealthy and the ticket was charged to daddy's AMEX. I mean, he *might* have said something like that and we *might* get to learn something about Jim and John in the process but the play never bothers.

Thank goodness for the three stars. It's a very minor evening of theater but they make it as painless as possible. My guest was actually annoyed that Cherry Jones even accepted her role. (It's that minor of a part, though Jones does what she can. She deserves much, much better.) Cannavale has a more substantial turn as the writer John. But still. Only Radcliffe has any sort of growth when his character evolves from sort-of timid to determined.

I never sat around thinking "Boy, fact checking would make a great subject for a play!" But you might do something with the interesting power dynamic. Suddenly an important writer must deal with a persnickety little fact checker? Or a famous celebrity is fielding queries from a nobody about their childhood? (More often, it would be the famous celebrity's assistant, though Emma Thompson once responded personally to a fellow fact checker's fax of queries with her own fax that began, "Dear lonely fact checker!")

That imbalance of power could be fun and we do get a quick visual gag when the small-ish Radcliffe is burdened with a giant backpack to look even tinier as the glowering Cannavale towers over him. To be fair, this dynamic is about the only thing going on in the play, but even

there the plotting is confused. Watching this intern interrupt the powerful editor he is meeting with for the first time and do it *repeatedly* made me squirm in my seat with disbelief as a magazine intern myself, never mind the man-splaining nature of the moment or how it spoiled Jim's arc.

Indeed, *The Lifespan of a Fact* fails to accomplish even the one essential task: making us care about the central debate of the entire play, that is the question of whether the essay gets published or not. More to the point, it never begins to make us care about their nebulous debate over facts versus fiction or god forbid come to care about the young man who committed suicide and sparked the whole story in the first place.

Instead, Jim makes an astonishing claim at the climax which at first I took at face value. It took me a minute to realize he was making some philosophical point about the nature of truth, conspiracy theories and the current online frenzy to seize on a factual error and spin off into lunacy. Finally, the editor Emily has the two men read out lines from the beginning of the essay as if it were Holy Scripture while morning light gently illuminates their faces. It's an absurd scene but the three actors are such pros they manage to create a quiet moment of grace through sheer talent alone. It's a fact that the play sure didn't help.

P.S. This is all based on a true incident. The writer and fact checker collaborated on a book about their imbroglio and it includes the original essay, the fact checker's notations and questions and the actual facts he dug up and their debate back and forth individual bits and the nature of "truth" in an essay as opposed to cold facts. After seeing the play, I actually tried to scare up a copy to read immediately but had no luck at The Strand or Barnes and* Noble. No such luck so for the moment I haven't read it. However based on the description, I can't help thinking they already found the perfect way to tell their story.

*That's an ampersand in the company's name of Barnes and Noble, by the way. It's also an "ampersand" between the first two credited writers of the play, Jeremy Kareken and David Murrell. In credits for films, TV, theater and the like, an ampersand indicates two people working together, a team of sorts, like Abbott and Costello. If they were three individual writers, they would be listed as Kareken, Murrell and Farrell. Why no ampersand in this piece? Blogger can't handle an ampersand and messes up the text if I include it. Like I said, I was a fact checker.

INDIA PALE ALE * out of ****

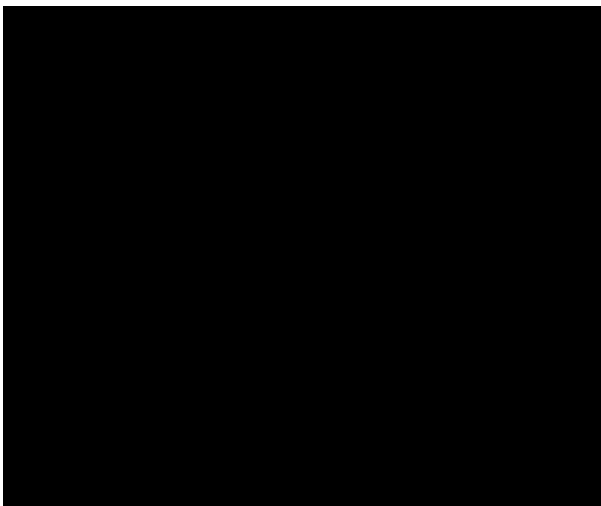
**MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT NEW YORK CITY
CENTER**

Nothing makes one feel more like a grinch than to dislike a hopelessly

earnest play brimming with good intentions. Time and again one hears about the valuable impact of people simply seeing themselves represented in popular culture. That's as true on stage as anywhere else. So with the vast majority of plays in the US about white people (and usually white men), one can appreciate and applaud plays that feature people from Puerto Rico or the Bahamas or Korean Americans or -- why not? -- Swedes and certainly Japanese and Italian and Irish and German and Filipino and Senegalese and gay and lesbian and bisexual and trans and a thousand other categories. Heck, when you never see yourself on stage, even a villain or cardboard character feels like a step forward.

So it's a pleasure to sense the palpable happiness of writer Jaclyn Backhaus, the cast and even audience members as they see Punjabi people onstage celebrating their families, their life in America, their traditions, their past and their future. *India Pale Ale* even winds up the play with a sharing of samosas between the characters and much of the audience, which is one way to win over critics and quite an effective one.

But good intentions get you nowhere and it would be an insult to the artists involved to grade *India Pale Ale* on a curve. Instead, one must be honest and say this thin, cliched drama plays out much like countless other stories about the same dilemma have done before. A young character yearns to break free of their family's constricting sense of what is proper and be a "real" American. Older folk tut-tut and others fall somewhere in the middle, some believing they must change and adapt while others see value in the old ways. What language to speak (at home and in public), what foods to eat, what religion to practice, arranged marriages, respect for elders, and on and on the issues go. Substitute Italian for Chinese for Haitian for Korean for Punjabi or for whomever and the story is comfortingly universal.



The story of assimilation can be told again and again but it must

somehow rise above that familiar structure to be fresh and new. Backhaus unfortunately does not. The play struggles to breathe life even into the tiresome scene of a clueless (but not quite ill-intentioned) white person indelicately asking about a character's race/ethnicity/culture. Or to be more blunt and awkward, "So what are you?" When act two raises the stakes far too dramatically, the play falls apart completely.

But it was never held together by much. A banal family anecdote about being descended from the pirate Brownbeard leads to dialogue delivered at times in faux pirate lingo (a lot of "yaar" and the like) as well as a family song about pirates, all of it repeated laboriously throughout the show. Two characters who seem in love are randomly separated, just so they can move towards a reunion at the end. Feelings are hurt and lessons are learned. And so on.

One simply can't judge actors when the material is weak, though the lead Shazi Raja is certainly an attractive presence. Like everyone else, Raja is surely proud to be telling stories of the Punjabi people. This first shaky step will hopefully lead to better stories down the road.

Of modest note is the handsome backdrop of scenic designer Neil Patel. By far the best tech element of the show, it features a metallic border and round circles that appeared to be the bottom of beer bottles...and indeed some of them actually were. It echoed the dream of our heroine to open her own bar and easily evoked the high seas with the assist of some lighting by Ben Stanton and the sound design by Elisheba Ittoop. It was attractive and eye-catching, without getting in the way of the proceedings.

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](#) *

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the creator of [BookFilter](#), a book lover's to [BookFilter](#)! Need a smart and easy gift? [Head to BookFilter](#)! Wondering w categories, like cookbooks and mystery and more? [Head to BookFilter](#)! It's a you do in a physical bookstore, provides comprehensive info on new releases e personal recommendations every step of the way. It's like a fall book preview category. He's also the cohost of [Showbiz Sandbox](#), a weekly pop culture podc of the day with top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called a

POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 6:19 PM 

NO COMMENTS:

[Post a Comment](#)

[Newer Post](#)

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)