



FRIDAY, APRIL 13, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: "MEAN GIRLS" PLAY NICE; O, HARRY CONNICK, WHERE IS THY "STING?"

**MEAN GIRLS** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**THE STING** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**MEAN GIRLS** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**AUGUST WILSON THEATRE**



In theater there are first nighters and second nighters. First nighters get to see a show right before it opens. Second nighters get to see a show right after it opens. One of the benefits of being a second nighter is that you hear the buzz -- you can either get pumped up for a great night or lower your expectations. That leaves you open to a happy surprise, which is certainly the case of Mean Girls. It's a three star production of a two star work and so I chose the friendly leaning two and a half stars out of four. I'll say this: sitting in the theater surrounded by a very happy audience that broke out in chatter during the break and applause at the end, I'd happily invest in Mean Girls right now. It's going to have a good run on Broadway, a successful tour and then mop up in community theater and high school productions for years to come.

The Tina Fey-penned film (based on a young adult novel by Rosalind Wiseman) is a kinder, sweeter Heathers. A new kid in school is adopted by the school's fierce queen bee Regina, turned into a star and then all hell breaks loose when she tries to claim the throne for herself. At the end, instead of the nihilistic nightmare of Heathers, we get some girl power and the message to be nice to others.

All of that translates easily to the stage in a musical that improves on the 2004 film on every level. Some modest additions about social media (and not one but two Trump zingers) make clear our story is set today without belaboring the point. (Those two Trump jokes will date quickly but boy did the audience love them.) The Tina Fey role is

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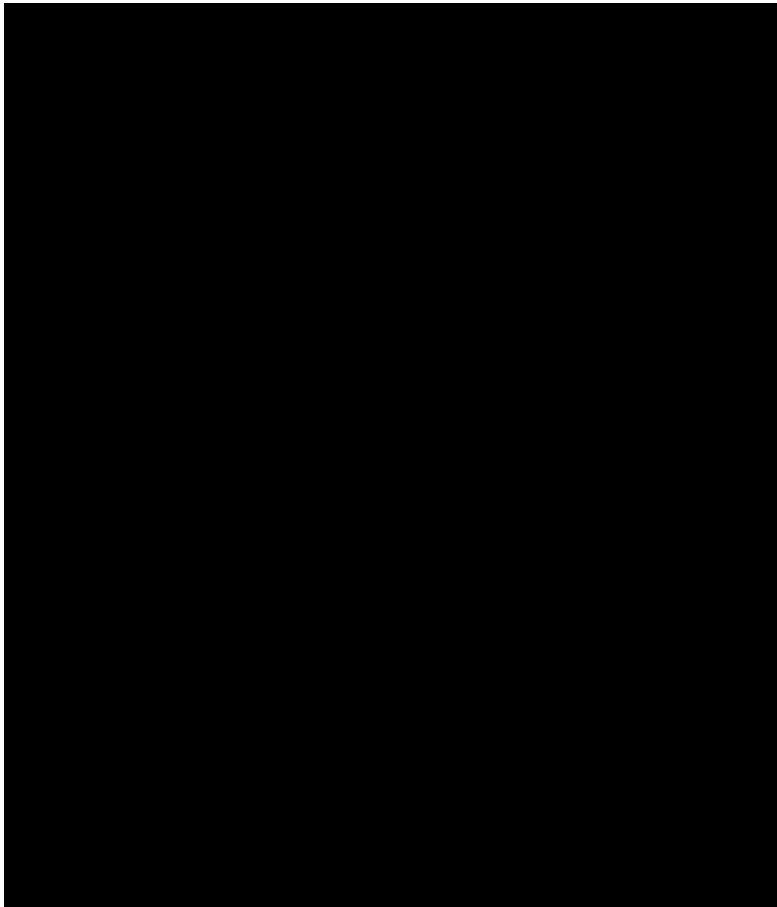
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wisely trimmed down. And with the young women all getting their solos, their characters are given a tad more complexity without straining too hard. And really, how much complexity do you want in a show about the new kid at school who tries to fit in? Not much, honestly.

All Cady wants to do is make friends. She grew up in Kenya surrounded by animals and home schooled by her scientist parents. Now Cady (an appealing Erika Henningsen) is exploring the hazardous terrain of high school in Chicago. (In one of the show's niftier gambits, characters break into animalistic rituals and screeches as if they're marking territory and the like.) She finds safe harbor with Janis and Damian (scene stealers Barrett Wilbert Weed and Grey Henson), who teach her to beware of Regina, the girl most likely to shred you with a vicious takedown or -- worse-- ignore you as not worth noticing. Regina's "friends" are the needy Gretchen (Ashley Park) and the dumb but not so mean Karen (Kate Rockwell) but really, she stands alone. Among the show's many painless but unmemorable numbers is the clunky tune "Apex Predator" in which Cady tags Regina as the most dangerous person around. With the help of Janis and Damian, she plans to take down Regina's dominance. But will Cady become a mean girl in the process, losing both her real friends and the dreamy boy Aaron (who -- duh -- dumped Regina because she was mean)? Of course she will! Followed quickly by the moral of the story and hugs all around, though not before a school bus kills someone dead. (No one dies, though they kind of do, actually.)



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THEATER: METROMANIACS,  
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THEATER: "SANCHO: AN ACT  
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THEATER: "MLIMA'S TALE"  
OF SHAME; "CHILDREN OF  
A L...

THEATER: "MEAN GIRLS"  
PLAY NICE; O, HARRY  
CONNICK,...

THEATER: WRESTLING WITH  
"ANGELS IN AMERICA"

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In other words, *Mean Girls* is thoroughly familiar territory done with enough energy to make you forget that for a while. In the thankless role of adults, Rick Younger is smoothly affable as the principal and Kerry Butler does yeoman's work as both the Tina Fey teacher and two parents (notably the dippy Mrs. George). Taylor Louderman has a blast with her Shirley Bassey-circa Bond theme song numbers and a drawling delivery. But really, everyone scores nicely, from Park's desperate need to be liked to Rockwell's lovely timing as the dippy Karen down to Selig making something out of the nothing role of boyfriend-to-be Aaron and Cheech Manohar having over-the-top fun as mathlete and rapper Kevin Gnapoor. (And props to his parents for the name Cheech!) Toss in an ensemble so cute and sharp in their dancing you'd gladly take them to prom and you can see why a show with a poor score manages to be such fun. At the center of it all is Henningsen as Cady -- like Fey on 30 Rock, she's the straight person surrounded by a carnival of clowns. That's no easy task.

While the melodies of Jeff Richmond are awkward, the lyrics of Nell Benjamin are at best workmanlike. It's hard to judge anyone as a singer on this show since few of the songs give them a melody worth delivering. So this is the rare musical whose book is superior to the songs -- and good enough to make you not care.

Give Fey the Most Improved award. You can also credit the nimble direction and choreography of Casey Nicholaw, who earns the school's Most Talented by taking not-bad songs like "Where Do You Belong?" "Stop" and "Whose House Is This?" (the show's best three, by far) and turning them into rousing successes with great staging and clever touches like the Busby Berkeley-like use of lunch trays. And amidst a strong ensemble, Barrett Wilbert Weed and Grey Hanson deserve Class Clown awards for their thoroughly winning hijacking of the entire night.

And a special nod to scenic designer Scott Pask and video design team Finn Ross and Adam Young. Broadway has been embracing digital projection to set scenes for a number of years now. And the technology has caught up with their needs. In the past, digital displays simply looked like a cheap way to cut corners. No more. From a brick-lined school hallway to a bathroom to a classroom to the wilds of Kenya, the sharp and utterly convincing backdrops allowed for cinematic scene changes with a minimum of props like a few rolling desks or some bathroom stalls. In the future, when a show decides to build an old-fashioned practical set, it will be a choice rather than a necessity. And video displays won't be a cheesy alternative but a tool for the artists working on the show to make wise use of -- exactly as they do here.

Sure, it's a Broadway show and you want to have fun. (Anyone who thinks critics show up ready to throw darts has never gone to the theater three times a week every week. We really, really want a show to

work.) And when your expectations are a little lowered, it's easier to be pleasantly surprised. So *Mean Girls* is by no means a great or even especially good show. Seeing it at your kid's high school a few years from now will probably be a chore. But with this talented cast and director Nicholaw energizing the evening, who would want to be a mean girl and put it down?

**THE STING** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**PAPER MILL PLAYHOUSE**

After five years in development, the creative team behind *The Sting* got two things emphatically right. First, they hired Harry Connick Jr for this musical adaptation of the classic Robert Redford/Paul Newman flick about con artists and they made damn sure he played the piano and charmed the crowd whenever possible. Second, they didn't keep Scott Joplin at arm's length -- there's no tepid nod to ragtime and his signature tune "The Entertainer." They introduce it right at the start and Joplin songs are scattered throughout. Unfortunately, Harry Connick Jr. on the piano remains the high point of the show (rather than a pleasing bonus as in *The Pajama Game*) and Joplin's music is so melodically strong it leaves the original score in the dust. There's not enough Joplin to lift the evening and just enough Joplin to make you miss him when it's gone.

Since a musical version of *Ghostbusters* is probably right around the corner, no idea is too wacky. But unlike most movie to Broadway adaptations, a musical version of *The Sting* makes sense. You've got the period setting, lots of colorful characters, a rock-solid script and the music of ragtime to play with. Paper Mill has been a launching pad for Broadway hopefuls and while a first class production can send something like *Newsies* right into the Tony mix, it can also expose a show's many flaws. Give the top-notch talent involved, no excuses can be made for a show that wouldn't con even a tourist into thinking they're having a good time. (The audience was notably tepid.)

Have you seen the Oscar-winning film, one of the most popular movies of all time? If not, here's the set-up. Some small time con artists get "lucky" and scam a guy out of his wallet. Turns out the guy is making a delivery for the feared crime boss Doyle Lonnegan and their luck is all bad. In the blink of an eye, the elderly Luther (a charming Kevyn Morrow) is dead and the kid Johnny Hooker (J. Harrison Ghee) has fled for his life. He ends up in Chicago, searching for the one man Luther said was as talented as Hooker at the con. That's Henry Gondorff (Harry Connick Jr.), a washed up alcoholic playing piano in a brothel.

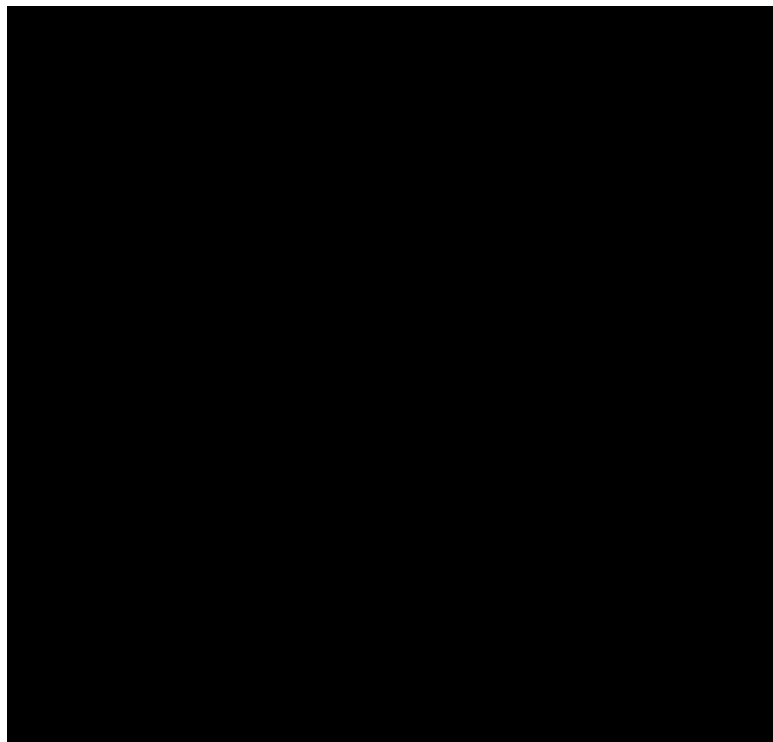
Hooker pours a pitcher of water on Henry, Henry barks at the "kid" that he's got a lot to learn and a bromance is born. With the sexy and capable aid of Billie (Kate Shindle) -- a woman who is Henry's sometime lover and full-time equal in scams -- they gather an all-star


team of shysters and swindlers to pull off the "long con," fleece Doyle but good and get sweet revenge for Luther.

Henry poses as an obnoxious gambler who transparently cheats the cheating Doyle at a private poker game. Then Hooker plays the disgruntled underling who gives Doyle a chance to ruin Henry by placing a bet on the horses at Henry's (fake) gambling den. Doyle test drives the plan, enjoys humiliating Henry with his winnings and then goes all in with a massive \$500,000 bet. With crooked cops and a straight arrow FBI team closing in and Doyle the epitome of a sore loser, how will they pull it off? In a sting, only the scammers get the pleasure of knowing how it's done. But in *The Sting* the fun for the audience is learning how they've been fleeced as well.

The con men and women are not the only ones gambling here. *The Sting* is also the story of its creators. Book writer Bob Martin enjoyed a rousing Broadway debut with *The Drowsy Chaperone*, followed only by the shoulder-shrug of a holiday offering *Elf*. Most of the music and lyrics are by the team of Mark Hollmann and Greg Kotis, who themselves enjoyed a remarkable Broadway debut with the musical *Urinetown*, which famously progressed from a stag party sketch to fringe fest success to Tony-winning triumph. Like any gambler, once you get a taste of the big score, you want nothing more than to do it again (and again) and this property is the sleekest bid yet for these artists.

They're surrounded by blue chip properties: director John Rando, choreographer Warren Carlyle, scenic designer Beowulf Boritt, costume designer Paul Tazewell and on down the line can all boast impressive credits. But you can have all the chips in the world. If the cards you draw are duds, you're not going to win.





The problems start at the very beginning. As in the film, it begins with a con. But unlike the film, the show prefaces that with Luther as a sort of narrator, telling us we're about to see a show about con artists and not to trust what we see. Then we're walked through the con they're about to pull, then they fleece the guy -- all done in such a laborious "here comes the switch" manner that the fun is drained out of it. You want to be scammed and then realize it was a trick, not have the trick explained to you at length in advance.

(I have not seen the film in many years, even though [it's my favorite from 1973](#). I preferred to give the stage version the best shot possible by not rewatching the film. If I get any details wrong, then I'd suggest that even if the film did spell out this con in advance, it was able to do so quickly and deftly. On stage, it has to be drawn out so the punters in the back can track what is happening and the fun is spoiled.)

The problems mount. Choreographer Warren Carlyle emphasizes tap, which somehow is perfect for con artists. Maybe it's because we get so hypnotized by their feet we have the sneaking suspicion they could lift our wallets at the same time and we'd never notice? Whatever the reason, that rhythmic style feels right. But one gets the impression most of the actors are dancers first and singers second. Not that I'd make much of a judgement on anyone singing the songs here. A few have the right lyrical idea, such as "Don't Treat Your Friends Like Marks" and the cleverly done act one closer "The First Race," which allows numerous betters to pepper the song with their cheers for a certain horse while Christopher Gurr has a blast delivering the sports announcer commentary. That's the show's modest high point, along with "The Card Game," with Connick Jr. having a grand old time infuriating the gangster with his boorish manner. Everything else from "The Thrill Of The Con" to Billie's torch song "Sometimes" feels rote and interchangeable.

And while tap is surely the right style for The Sting, it's perhaps not ideal for staging chase scenes. Too many scenes involve people tapping this way and that across the stage, fine if you're staging a lark like On The Town but deadly if you're looking to create any suspense. A scene where Hooker is on a staircase trying to outrun some bad guys is especially ludicrous -- they face each other and tap up a step and down a step and you can't imagine what anyone was thinking. (Another poor choice is attempting to duplicate scenes of a mysterious assassin hunting down Hooker. That person in the movie is usually off camera. On stage, they stand around waving a gun and it just doesn't work.)

The sets of Boritt are serviceable though it wavers between the full-on

realism of the casino and the more suggestive style of other scenes. (And why are the paintings on display in Lonnegan's home and elsewhere so blurry?) In another example of poor staging by director John Rando, we have six or so doors to suggest the hallway of an apartment building. One would have been plenty and when that scene is over they sort of slide over to one part of the stage, waiting for a chance to be dragged off. And why are they there? So a neighbor can spot Hooker and a waitress he's fallen for having a tryst. But since the next scene dismisses the crucial importance of that neighbor (a plot point from the movie), they never needed her or the other five doors in the first place.

These minor faults of the book can't hold a candle to the major missed opportunity. The film starred Redford and Newman in a re-teaming of their work on Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. (Those two men had so much chemistry they should have followed up *The Sting* with *Brokeback Mountain*.) Yet the original screenplay by David S. Ward conceived of the younger man Hooker as black. This version jumped on that idea and cast Ghee alongside Connick. Brilliant! You can immediately introduce the blues and all other sorts of musical colors and rethinking that character gives the show a great chance to see this story anew.

The story is set in 1936 during the Great Depression and a white man and a black man teaming up to defraud a gangster and some crooked cops immediately becomes more interesting if one of them is black. But other than a few throw-away lines by Lonnegan and that crooked cop (played by Robert Wuhl, who has little to do but glower) the show makes absolutely nothing of this. That might be admirable if it weren't such a wasted opportunity. Hooker's pushy manner with Lonnegan works in the movie because Paul Newman has such a twinkle in his eye even Lonnegan (played by Robert Shaw) can't help admiring his chutzpah. That would hardly be the case if it were a black man eating off his plate, a moment which is just ridiculous here. Imagine Hooker using his race to con Lonnegan: Hooker's bristling anger towards his boss could be more easily understood (though a chance for Connick to demean him racially is ignored) and Lonnegan's own prejudice would make it impossible for him to consider Hooker might be conning *him*. So much might have been done with this decision but book writer Martin doesn't even try.

What they do instead is bring Luther back from the dead. Morrow is immediately appealing in his opening scenes. Yet the show has no narrator and once he's dead, he's dead. In a too-long act two, however, Hooker blithely says he wishes Luther could have seen the trick he just pulled off...and lo and behold, there is Hooker for a very unnecessary musical break when what we want to do is tighten the screws and let the long con take its course.

And that brings us to the casting. Despite the thin material, some of the supporting talent bring humanity and depth to parts that

otherwise lack it, including Shindle as Billie, Janet Dacal as the waitress Loretta, Gurr as Singleton and Morrow. Others with more to do can't paper over the show's deficiencies, such as Tom Hewitt as the entirely unthreatening Lonnegan, Wuhl as the crooked cop and Peter Benson as the nervous Erie Kid, a part better left out entirely. Connick is certainly up to the role of Henry and does a lot of heavy lifting to make the evening bearable. Musicals move fast but this one does such a poor job of spelling out the characters anyone who hasn't seen the movie will probably be wondering why Henry and everyone is so eager to take part in this con and be surprised when we're told Henry and Hooker have become friends. (They have.)

But the biggest problem is Ghee, who has huge shoes to fill when it comes to Paul Newman in his wily prime and doesn't come close. As Hooker he offers nothing -- no danger, no anger, no humor, no charm. It's a shock to see he played the flamboyant Lola in *Kinky Boots* on the road, given how tamped down he is here, so I will adamantly stick to my rule of not judging people's talent based on their appearance in a poor show. The more stage time people have, the less they shine (except for hard-working Harry) and that surely is the fault of *The Sting*, not the artists.

It's a dispiriting evening towards the end. Could they rescue this project? Would recasting, a little cutting and maybe another number turn it around? No, I don't think so; not even close. Gamblers know when you've tossed in a lot of chips, the hardest thing in the world to do is to fold...and that's when suckers really lose their shirts. Sometimes you just have to walk away from the game.

## 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

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