



FRIDAY, APRIL 27, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: METROMANIACS, DISCO-MANIACS AND DYPSOMANIACS

THE METROMANIACS *** out of ****

SUMMER: THE DONNA SUMMER MUSICAL * out of ****

THE SEAFARER ** out of ****

THE METROMANIACS *** out of ****

RED BULL THEATER AT THE DUKE ON 42ND STREET

What, pray tell, is a "translaptation?" It's a nonsense word made up by playwright David Ives to describe his free-flowing communion with French farce. He adapts them and translates them and ultimately transmutes them into something sort of new-ish that owes a heavy debt to the original but is all his own...and yet is not. Oh, to hell with this mania for authorship. What Ives has created with his string of translaptations is a body of work that is positively delightful.

Despite a slow start, *The Metromaniacs* proves to be a fine addition to that corpus delicti of playful plagiarism. The title refers to a mania for poetry and is an Ivesian translaptation of a 1738 play by Alexis Piron. Ignored by the Académie Française -- despite penning an "Ode To The Penis" which was understandably lengthy -- Piron had his revenge on the snobs. How? By celebrating *another* snubbed poet, a man who was himself spurned by the Académie but had *his* revenge. How? By publishing rustic poems and pretending to be a backwater poetess; "she" was immediately celebrated by one and all, including Voltaire, who offered to marry the little known versifier. (If you haven't guessed, the show's backstory is as entertaining as the show.) When the truth came out, Voltaire was humiliated, the once-unknown poet revenged...and then revenged once more when Piron made the scandal infamous all over again with his play.

In steps David Ives, who uses the structure of the play to create his own Shakespearean comedy. Lovers are mistaken and misused most



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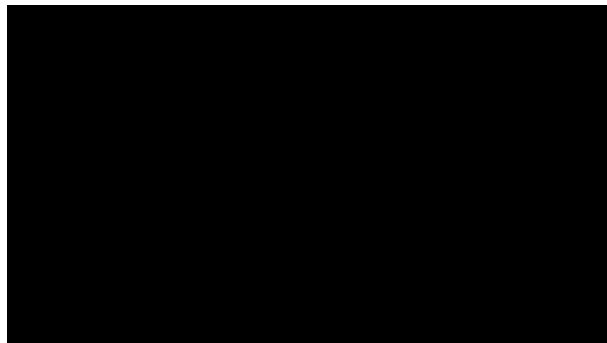
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willingly until all confusion is banished and most everyone paired off at the finale, even if the gender imbalance of five men and two women calls for some rather inventive inverting of our expectations. I will NOT outline the plot too clearly. It's a monster of conspiracy and confusion, with the show itself stopping to explain matters several times over and then throwing up its hands (script? pentameters?) and telling you not to bother. Still, let's have a go.

The Metromaniacs takes place in the lavish home of Francalou (Adam LeFevre), who has written his own play and looks forward to seeing it performed for his guests. A sylvan wood has been constructed in a large foyer/lobby/whatever as a setting. He has a lovely daughter Lucille (Amelia Pedlow) who is besotted with poetry and is himself a secret poet of some renown. Only their servant Lisette (Dina Thomas) knows the truth.

Enter various young men. The dim Dorante (Noah Averbach-Katz) would sorely love to couple with Lucille, but she will only couple with a master of couplets. The poet Damis (Christian Conn) is a friend of Dorante and offers up his own scribbles so Lucille can be wooed. Damis himself is pledged to the unseen, unknown poetess all of France is talking about, the poetess who is -- in fact -- the amiable father of Lucille. Dorante's servant Mondor (Adam Green) and Francalou's Lisette do what servants do: talk back to their masters while masterminding the stratagems to pair off lover with lover and bring about a happy ending.



And a happy ending there is, despite some modestly rough going. Act One was not the sheer delight of other recent shows by Ives, such as *The Liar*, *The School For Lies* and -- no lie -- *The Heir Apparent*. I was already wondering how to describe this more earth-bound, but engaging work. After the first act, I judged it was still champagne, if a little flat. Then Act Two began and somehow the show picked up steam until the bubbly finale was so fun that all was forgiven.

Each actor had their moment, with Thomas a saucy servant supreme, Pedlow pouting away, Averbach-Katz incapable of conning anyone, Green breaking the fourth wall with a well-timed smirk and Peter Kybart grouching nicely as a necessary plot device/legal aide. If the winning, handsome Conn is not precisely the lead, he certainly has the charm of one. And LeFevre as always provides such generous warmth

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and presence that any nonsense that revolves around him becomes immediately plausible and indeed pleasurable.

Somehow the set by James Noone didn't delight -- the forest glade in the foyer somehow wasn't incongruous enough for my taste. That's neither here nor there since it provided plenty of hide-aways for lovers to canoodle behind. All other elements were fine and it coalesced in act two with enough artistry to make me forget the pacing/plotting/something-or-othering of act one that prevented me from immediately enjoying the proceedings. So (eventual) credit to director Michael Kahn. As with all of the plays by David Ives, I look forward to seeing *The Metromaniacs* revived in years to come. Unlike many others, I can imagine it being improved. But even if they merely match the standard set here, it will be worth it for farcical-maniacs like me.

SUMMER: THE DONNA SUMMER MUSICAL * out of ****
LUNT-FONTANNE THEATRE

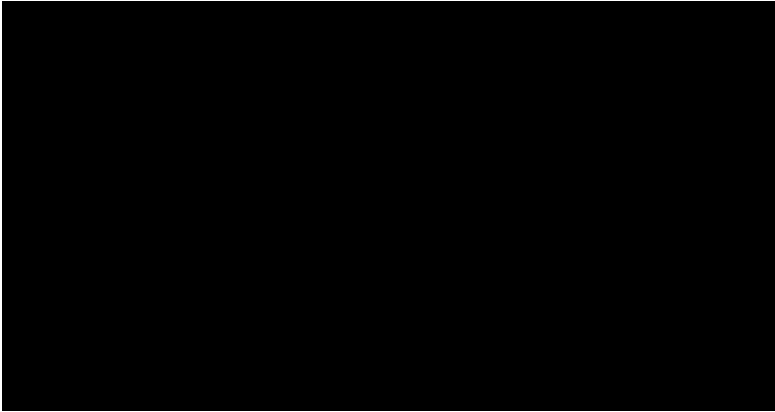
Well, what did we expect? Actually, all we expected were some disco balls, disco dancing and a great singer belting out some disco classics. Unfortunately, it took *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical* until the finale to really deliver the goods. Before that, we trudged through the admittedly interesting life of disco queen Donna Summer.

When you learn that Donna Summer was sexually abused by a preacher as a little girl, witnessed a murder and fled the country in fear of her life, moved to Germany when touring with a production of *Hair*, learned the language, married, had a kid and then left her husband to pursue stardom...well, you can understand why this sounds like a life worth dramatizing.

Unfortunately, *Summer* never moves beyond a TV movie version of that life, dutifully showing our heroine fend off an attacker in her home with an oversized fashion magazine, being born again thanks to her siblings and in the show's most egregious scene, seeing not one, not two but three daughters off to college and the world in three separate scenes that -- needless to say -- are repetitive and dull to anyone who is not actually the parent of said child. Blame book writers Colman Domingo, Robert Cary and Des McNuff (who also handled the no-nonsense direction that keeps the 100 minute show moving).

By the time we learn she's a poor driver, loves Jesus but also loves a married man, considered suicide and then face the not-so inevitable moment where Summer defensively explains away an anti-gay comment just so all the boxes of her life can be checked, this under two hour show begins to feel awfully long.





What a pity. The knee-jerk reaction is to eye-roll over another jukebox musical. But this one had some clever ideas. Most of the cast and chorus are women, which symbolizes the female power and #MeToo vibe they were going for. Donna Summer wasn't just the Queen of Disco, they argue, but a trailblazer for women everywhere. I'm not sure switching labels from Casablanca to Geffen qualifies as such, but I would have been happy for the show to make its case more convincingly, or at least more artistically. When the show begins with Summer backed by a "band" of all-female musicians, the impact of girl power is painfully undercut by the fact that the women are almost all simply miming the playing of instruments or doing so with only rudimentary skill. Hey, they're dancers and singers and work hard nonstop throughout the show so full credit to them. But when you're trying to make a statement, simply *pretending* to be a musician really doesn't cut it. And that's just the start.

Another good idea? Summer begins dissecting how she and Giorgio Moroder and others created their hits: all their songs began with a bass line, she tells us. The show hints at but never quite delivers on this premise. Why not excitingly demonstrate the creative process for one of her hits, letting the audience hear a bass line and then watch as they toss in element after element, like the synths and arrangement and lyrics and give the audience the thrill of hearing it all come together. Yet these lessons in crafting a pop hit and female empowerment are never followed through. (Though Summer's signing with a new label does boast one of the better production numbers: "She Works Hard For The Money.")

At least the three leads do indeed work hard, playing Donna Summer at various ages, not to mention her mother and her children in the bargain. Storm Lever has the least interesting part as the young Donna. But Ariana DeBose does well as Disco Donna and LaChanze is the only reason this show is bearable for bringing life to Diva Donna, despite having to deliver some truly leaden exposition. She's a true pro. So is the game cast and creative team, with Paul Tazewell doing the best work with the costumes that capture an era without being jokey.

Then there are the bad ideas, like indicating the abuse Summer faced as a child early on but waiting until a late moment in the show to spell it out. Since we already understood what was happening, what's the point of delaying? Even worse, the book continually interrupts the songs for the plot. Who the heck wants to hear *half* of "MacArthur Park" or any of her others hits? These aren't songs that push the plot or reveal character. They are pop hits and they work best in that context. *Jersey Boys* managed the trick of teasing out the growth of the band in act one and then revealing their hitmaker status to dramatic effect. This show doesn't attempt that and worse, for far too long it doesn't even give us the songs. It's like a jukebox musical that keeps jumping to the next track before the last one is over.

And why the heck are we plodding our way through the life of Donna Summer and inserting lesser songs just because they work for the plot we never care about anyway? My God, we have to wait until the very end for not one, not two but three giant disco balls to finally start spinning. "Hot Stuff" is the best moment of the show -- a full-on dance number with the song presented in all its glory, backed by a big chorus of disco dancers doing their moves. That's immediately followed by "Last Dance" -- also given its due -- and you think, what the heck were they waiting for? Maybe it should have been staged immersively Off Broadway with a full-on disco floor and the audience surrounding and amidst a cast of pro dancers and maybe they should have lots of disco songs and not just Summer and a VIP section for high-paying customers where you can mingle with Andy Warhol and Liza and perhaps cocaine for the full 1970s effect and -- ok, that's not what they wanted to do here. That's just a disco party.

Like the recent *Motown* musical, this would have been better as the ultimate Donna Summer show rather than a tired bio-pic. Yes, *Summer* without her life story would just be a glorified concert. So what? At least it would be fun and we'd all remember the reason for six years no one was played on the radio as much as Donna Summer.

THE SEAFARER ** out of **** **IRISH REPERTORY THEATRE**

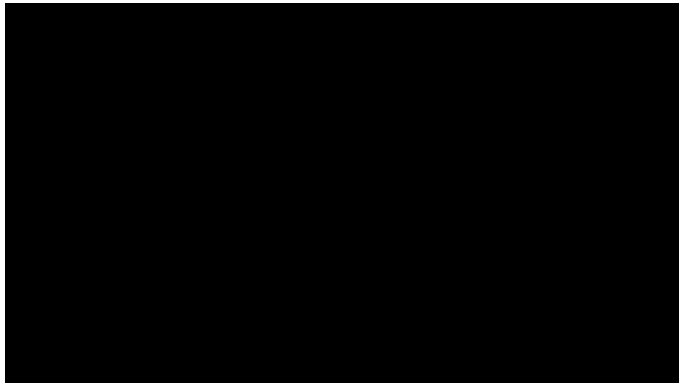
The bad news? A second visit to playwright Conor McPherson's scary little Christmas story confirms the suspicion that this is one of his lesser plays. The somewhat good news is that the brilliant Matthew Broderick continues to shake off the ennui that has enveloped his stage work in recent years. Friends said his work in *Shining City* (also by McPherson) felt like a reawakening for this talent. He doesn't quite score in *The Seafarer*, but it's not as good and at least his offbeat little rhythm remains anchored in the tale at hand.

That tale is a sad and shaggy one. Sharky is back at home, tending to his alcoholic, recently blinded mess of a brother Richard. They live in semi-squalor, with Richard petulantly refusing to be shaved or bathed

on Christmas Eve, since surely he'll want to do it on Christmas Day and why bother doing it twice? A Charlie Brown-like tree sits sadly on a table and that's about it for holiday cheer. All Richard really wants is to drink and drink and drink. Sharky might want to drink to forget his shattered marriage and -- apparently -- a dashed romance with a married woman that he has fled home to avoid. But Sharky has sworn off the stuff, at least for a day or two, much to Richard's disgust.

The two brothers bicker and fight over nothing, joined by the equally dissolute Ivan, who would rather drink than head home (on Christmas Eve!) to face his wife and kids. She'll give him an earful for being out and drinking on Christmas Eve, so he puts off the dreaded showdown, which means she'll be all the angrier so he puts it off again and so on and so forth. Norman Rockwell, it isn't.

The tedium is broken only by the unwelcome arrival of Nicky, the man shacking up with Sharky's ex-wife and driving his car, no less. Nicky brings along a stranger named Mr. Lockhart. When the others are off searching for drink or messing about with this or that, Mr. Lockhart calmly informs Sharky that he is the devil, come for a rematch. It turns out Sharky played cards with the devil and won his freedom after accidentally killing a man. But he promised to play for his soul in the future and now that the devil has tracked him down, it's time to play for keeps. And the devil has every intention of winning.



McPherson is a marvelous spinner of stories, with his ghost story *The Weir* perhaps the most famous. (Irish Repertory Theatre mounted a peerless revival of that one which deserved to run for years and did right by his *Shining City* as well, I've been told.) Here the story is fine enough, though it's like a less than scintillating story told by an old friend who is usually a dependable raconteur -- you need to indulge him a little to keep it going and don't mind, not really. He's told better stories before and will do so again.

Of the cast, Andy Murray made the strongest impression as the put-upon Sharky while the rest were quite variable, I fear. Broderick in recent years has seemed to enter Brando territory, searching for some internal rhythm or just maybe bored by the process or *something* to the point where one wants to shake him awake. Here, he is still delivering an odd, distant turn but it feels a little more rooted in the

proceedings. I'll take hope where I can, especially in a play with precious little of it. Colin McPhillamy as Richard is overshadowed by the ghost of performances past. (More on that soon.)

The shambling set by Charlie Corcoran and stained costumes by Martha Reilly make sure we never hope for a holly, jolly Christmas. But the original music by Ryan Rumery was played at such a jarring high volume it's impossible to judge the merits of the tunes on their own. Do I blame director Ciarán O'Reilly for this and other faults? Or do I blame my memory of the original Broadway production? Even then I had reservations about the play. But Ciarin Hinds was a more menacing devil. And as the alcoholic Richard, actor Jim Norton delivered a performance so indelible, so remarkable I'll remember it for the rest of my days. He won the Tony for it and if he hadn't, everyone who saw the show would have stormed the stage like Kanye and demanded a recount.

Poor McPhillamy (hell, poor Olivier or poor Mark Rylance) could not compete with that memory. I'd suggest you might enjoy this production more if you'd never seen it before, but I enjoyed that production primarily *because* of Norton. Unwrapping this Christmas story a second time does it no favor.

THEATER OF 2018

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[Mlima's Tale](#) ** 1/2

[Children Of A Lesser God](#) ** 1/2

[Sancho: An Act Of Remembrance](#) ** 1/2

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[Summer: The Donna Summer Musical](#) *

[The Seafarer](#) **

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