



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: Ruben and Clay's Holiday TV Special (Minus The Cameras)

RUBEN AND CLAY'S FIRST ANNUAL CHRISTMAS CAROL FAMILY FUN PAGEANT SPECTACULAR REUNION SHOW **

out of ****

IMPERIAL THEATER

Okay, if you have any interest in *Ruben and Clay's First Annual Christmas Carol Family Fun Pageant Spectacular Reunion Show*, by all means go ahead! If you're on the fence, one has to wonder why? Are you worried they won't sing enough Christmas songs or make enough *American Idol* references or deliver enough groan-worthy jokes? Fear not! If you're asking yourself, who are Ruben and Clay, well then this probably isn't for you. Unless that is, you're a tourist and you'd like to go to a Broadway show but don't want to spend \$200 and you've already seen the Rockettes and you're in town and apparently *Hamilton* tickets are really hard to get (who knew?) and you just want a break from walking in which case, I think you're in luck!

This is the second year in a row someone has plopped a TV-centric holiday show onto Broadway, but this time it's actually more of a present for tourists instead of a trap. That earlier show included winners of *The Voice*, *America's Got Talent* and the like, which is to say shows that aren't *American Idol*. And we all know *American Idol* is the talent show that has actually discovered talent in recent years: Oscar-winning, Grammy-winning and (eventually) Tony-winning talent. (Constantine Maroulis was nominated for a Tony Award in 2009 for *Rock Of Ages* and Fantasia deserved a nomination when she stepped into *The Color Purple*.) Heck, Clay Aiken already appeared on Broadway during the run of *Spamalot*. So this isn't even his Broadway debut!

Have you guessed that I'm a fan of *American Idol*? Toss in the fact



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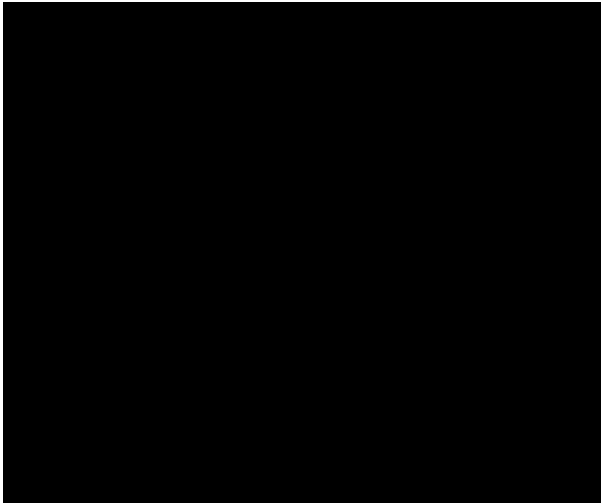
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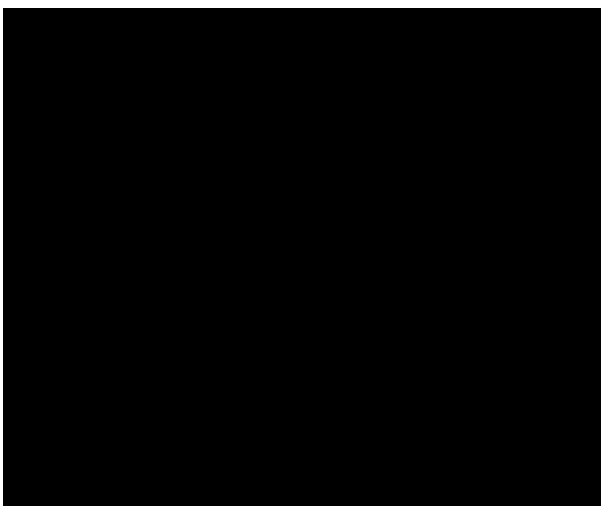
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that I own a ridiculous amount of Christmas music AND I enjoy good/bad holiday specials of yore and you can imagine I am the perfect audience member for *Ruben and Clay's First Annual Christmas Carol Family Fun Pageant Spectacular Reunion Show*.



Clay Aiken promises right at the top of the show that it will be modeled after those Bing Crosby/Perry Como/Partridge Family holiday specials and Ruben Studdard insists that means a very cheesy vibe. Mission accomplished! The medleys are so non-stop, the gags so dad-worthy, the skits and sentimentality so on-cue that I looked in vain for the TV cameras. It's not especially good. And it's not so-bad-it's good. It's just what it is -- a holiday special with two guys who rose to fame together via one of the most-watched TV showdowns of all time, enjoyed some success on their own and genuinely don't mind being joined at the hip even 15 years later. They don the same duds they wore for their *Idol* audition, Clay keeps trying to get his name listed first in the show's title, Ruben kids him about being the runner-up and if any of this makes you roll your eyes, well that's the point.



It all slips by painlessly, though not as fast as it should. Act One was

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heavier on the jokes -- including an admirably timely rewrite of "Baby It's Cold Outside." I especially enjoyed the goofy, *Laugh-In* style series of one liners. Actors stuck their heads through the curtain a la that variety show to deliver zingers. The winning gag for my group: "What does Santa Claus use to clean his sleigh? Comet!" Act Two was more serious, with the two leads each sharing videotaped memories of Christmas amidst a showcased ballad, then bringing tears to their eyes when they chatted about their friendship.

The supporting cast of three women and two men did a lot of heavy lifting on this nonsense. Saddled with bland material, they did their job and stayed out of the way of Clay and Ruben. Julian Diaz-Granados made the most of his chance, delivering the best vocals, the right goofy (but not dismissive) attitude to the nonsense and CW-ready looks (he should soon book a comedy or at least a guest spot on *Riverdale*).

The whole thing looks like it cost about \$5, which actually helps -- the flimsier the material, the more a hometown, just-doing-it-for-fun vibe let's you feel supportive, the way one might at a school production. The night I attended they were gifted with a *very* eager audience member chosen to come on stage for a game of word association. Her hijinks alone raised the spirits (and I hate audience participation). Still, at two hours and ten minutes, it's easily 20 minutes too long. For starters, a PSA for the worthy charity [Inclusion Project](#) unnecessarily began act two. (They work to integrate kids with disabilities anywhere and everywhere and a portion of proceeds benefit them.) The video should have been displayed during the intermission. Then, cut one medley from each act, cut the jarring joke about Ruben using a bathroom installed in the set's chimney and maybe one or two of their heart-tugging videos and voila, you've just improved things mightily. (The only other joke that doesn't work is having Ruben flatly reject one of the cast members as a date right at the start. Her interest in a boyfriend is a very minor thread, but why shoot her down at the beginning or do it so coldly?)

If you'll notice, I haven't mentioned the music. What's to say? By and large, the medleys and arrangements are unmemorable and uninspired, if competent. The exception, unfortunately, is when Ruben tackles one of my favorite holiday songs: Stevie Wonder's "One Little Christmas Tree." Here music director Ben Cohn gets in the way of the song (and Ruben's singing) with a clunky arrangement. In terms of voice, I'd say Ruben's smooth vocals have risen a bit over the years (rather than lowered) and hold up better than Clay's. Of course, Clay still hits the Olympian heights, which sent the crowd I saw the show with into ecstasy. And Clay is far more comfortable onstage, bantering with the audience, delivering the goofy lines and setting the right tone. Ruben is so laid back he almost disappears at times, though he notably wakes up during a brief bit imitating a preacher to introduce one of Clay's showcases. (His dry wit comes across better on video.)

You can't complain all this is corny because Ruben beats you to it. Yet their chemistry come across nicely here, from the opening gags to their final duet on a Christmas standard that ends the night on a touch of faith...and another big, big note from Clay. Hey, they know their audience. Whether that audience is big enough to bring them back for *Ruben and Clay's Second Annual Christmas Carol Family Fun Pageant Spectacular Reunion Show*, only time (and the box office) will show. It's doubtful. But if *American Idol* wants to extend its brand to a holiday special (and why not?) they've got the perfect hosts.

THEATER OF 2018

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Saint Joan **

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Summer and Smoke ** 1/2

My Fair Lady ** 1/2

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On Beckett ***

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Ruben and Clay's First Annual Christmas Show **

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