



FRIDAY, APRIL 26, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "TOOTSIE" IS A DRAG

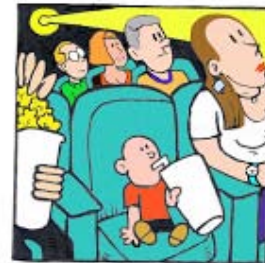
TOOTSIE ** 1/2 out of ******MARQUIS THEATRE**

The film *Tootsie* is one of the great comedies of all time. It came out the same year as the delightful *Victor/Victoria*, which is a de facto musical (and became a poor one on Broadway, years ago). While *Victor/Victoria* is an unabashed delight, it's also a throwback to Hollywood movies of old. *Victor/Victoria* is fun and if lessons are learned, it's not for lack of not trying.

Tootsie however is perfect for our #MeToo moment. Out of work actor Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman in the film) is truly gifted but he's also a pain in the ass. He's obnoxiously opinionated and a casual womanizer and pretty insufferable. Sure, his instincts may be great, but who needs instincts when wearing a tomato costume for some dumb ad or something? As his agent says, "No one will hire you." Out of sheer desperation, Michael auditions for a minor part in a daytime soap...as a woman. His performance in the scene (and indeed his performance as the "actress" Dorothy Michaels) gets Michael the job.

Suddenly, a brief role gets extended and extended again and the character played by Dorothy turns into a sensation. Michael is finally a hit! More importantly, Michael learns to empathize with others. He learns the nonsense women must go through even before walking out the door in the morning. He learns how to get his ideas listened to without alienating everyone and their mother. He dodges groping hands and unethical come-ons from men, lifts up the actors around him and does it all while creating a character on the soap that really matters. Michael becomes a better man while playing a woman than he ever was while being a man.

Oh and the 1982 film is hilariously funny, from the obnoxious director



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BLOG ARCHIVE

▼ 2019 (31)

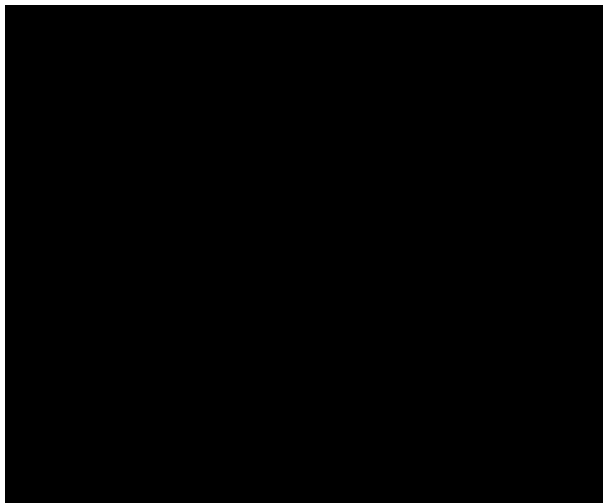
► June (1)

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who can't believe this semi-truck of a woman has become a hit to the aging soap star who sees it as his right to an on-screen kiss with every new female member of the cast. Toss in Bill Murray as Michael's droll roommate, Teri Garr as his insecure pal and Jessica Lange as the dreamily sweet star of the soap Michael falls for and you've got a genuine classic with heart and smarts to spare. Plus it all climaxes with a live episode of the daytime soap that ranks as among the funniest in film history. Hoffman's performance is one of the all-time greats. It's not a guy in drag: Dorothy becomes a character as real to us as she is to Michael. It's subtle, funny, layered and a wonder to behold. (Hoffman deserved the Oscar but you can't beat Gandhi.)

It all works beautifully and the basic bones of *Tootsie* the musical are the same. They somewhat reasonably switch Michael's big break from a part on a daytime soap to a role in a new Broadway musical. (My guest argues it wasn't necessary at all, but I understand the impulse.) They also switch the aging soap star lothario who falls for Dorothy into a dim-witted reality TV star cast in the musical to sell tickets. Otherwise many of the beats from the opening to the finale are the same.

Unfortunately, the changes weaken the story from start to finish. After an artistic breakthrough with *The Band's Visit*, composer David Yazbeck's music and lyrics are all middling numbers with hard-to-remember melodies. An occasional clever lyric pops out, but they're all jokey lines and eventually even those begin to blur together. If you can't sing the praises of the show's score, at least you can sing the praises of the original *Tootsie* film script, where most of the best moments in the show can be found. If you've seen the film, this will seem a pale imitation with at best some serviceable songs. If you haven't seen the film, *Tootsie* will probably play a little better. It offers the tourist-friendly heart-warming vibe of *Kinky Boots* (not a compliment, in my book) and should do so for maybe a year to come. It's not bad and the actors redeem many moments but it should have been much better.



▼ April (10)

THEATER: "INK" STAINED
WRETCHES GET THEIR
DUE

THEATER: "TOOTSIE" IS A
DRAG

THEATER: "ALL MY SONS"
LACKS A FAMILY

THEATER: 'HADESTOWN'
FINDS HEAVEN ON
BROADWAY

THEATER: "BURN THIS"
BARELY SMOLDERS

THEATER: THE PAIN OF "THE
PAIN OF MY
BELLIGERENCE"...

THEATER: QUESTIONING
"SOCRATES"

THEATER: "OKLAHOMA!" IS
OK THE SECOND TIME
AROUND!...

THEATER: LESS IS MORE AT
"MRS. MURRAY'S
MENAGERIE"...

THEATER: "THE CRADLE
WILL ROCK" PUTS YOU TO
SLEEP

► March (5)

► February (1)

► January (5)

► 2018 (33)

► 2017 (6)

► 2016 (2)

► 2015 (17)

► 2014 (2)

► 2013 (5)

► 2012 (17)

► 2011 (15)

► 2010 (10)

► 2009 (43)

► 2008 (86)

► 2007 (781)

► 2006 (2412)

First, what they got right: the casting. Santino Fontana as Michael/Dorothy works very hard and like Ginger Rogers he does it all backwards and in heels. Fontana even sings in a different register when playing the part of Dorothy, which is undoubtedly a lot harder than one even imagines. He captures Michael's self-defeating "integrity" quite nicely and as much as the show allows, evolves into a slightly more self-aware guy who will at least try to listen when others are talking. Lilli Cooper is a pleasant presence as his love interest, the actress Julie. But the role is no more interesting here than it was in the film. (Jessica Lange's Oscar was really a consolation prize for losing Best Actress in *Frances* to Meryl Streep's unstoppable turn in *Sophie's Choice*.)

The role of best pal Sandy (played in the film by Teri Garr) is the really fun female part and Sarah Stiles has a blast. With her comic number "What's Gonna Happen," she also has the show's one decent song and makes the most of it. Julie Halston as the new musical's producer, Reg Rogers as the hateful genius director and Michael McGrath as Michaels' long-suffering agent? All dependable pros.

John Behlmann is the dim-witted reality TV star who falls for Dorothy; his inarticulate cry of love ("This Thing") is the show's second-best number. To be honest, the rest made no impression, including act one closer "Unstoppable." And while few can match Bill Murray, actor Andy Grotelueschen gives his own quiet spin to Michael's roomie.

But why has Michael's roomie been changed from a guy who writes plays (presumably very good plays or Michael wouldn't act in them) into a guy who doesn't really write anything at all? He claims to be a playwright but even Sandy calls him out on never actually writing a word, as far as anyone can tell. Is it a minor change? Yes, but it turns him from a fellow artist striving to breakthrough to...a kind of loser. And for what reason? All it does is make him less interesting and place Michael in a world where his best friends aren't remotely as talented as he.

The biggest change is moving Michael from the world of daytime soaps to the world of musical theater. It wasn't necessary but it might have worked. We don't need rigorous realism in a comedy, yet everything that happened on the daytime soap was believable. In contrast, if Michael Dorsey worked on a play that depicted the world of musical theater the way *Tootsie* does, he'd stop everything and say, "This is ridiculous!" Dorothy suggests changes to the script (a script written by the genius writer/director no less) by simply writing new dialogue and conspiring with the female lead to do their version during rehearsals? And the producer of the show undercuts the director by saying they should do it that way? This is ridiculous. Oh and Michael also whips up some new costume sketches and changes the entire setting of the play to 1950s Italy? Of course, says the producer! Even though at that late stage it would be impossible and cost millions of dollars even if it could somehow be done. This too is

ridiculous. Finally, the idea that the play has been completely changed and is now starring Dorothy Michaels and her name is up in lights all alone...and the female lead of the show isn't angry but in fact delighted for her new best pal? Well, this is truly ridiculous.

What foolish nitpicking. It's a musical comedy and who cares about "real life." True and if the songs were better and Michael's transformation compelling, well maybe I wouldn't mind. But it's the very fact that we don't see Michael realistically turn into a woman (and all the painful eyebrow plucking etc that involves) and we don't see Michael realistically navigate the workplace as a woman and we don't see Michael realistically fall in love that undercuts the idea that Michael has changed at all.

For proof, look at the finale.

SPOILER ALERT

In the film, the soap must go live for an entire episode since since some footage was damaged. That gives Michael the chance to spin a fantastic story on camera and then pull off his wig and reveal the character (and Dorothy) has been a man all along. It's side-splittingly funny. On stage, they have this happen at the climax of the opening night performance. Michael/Dorothy knows he must reveal all and stumbles through the finale, distracted and barely aware of where he should stand, mechanically delivering his lines and making a mess of things until the dramatic reveal.

That's crazy. The one fact we know about Michael is that he's a terrific actor. Michael would be giving the performance of his lifetime on opening night, well aware there are critics in the audience who haven't seen the show yet. Yes, maybe they've heard Dorothy is one to watch but this is their first time seeing her. Plus, his commitment to a play he's transformed into a personal triumph wouldn't allow him to do anything less than his best. The big reveal should come at the curtain call when Dorothy/Michael would make a speech and reveal all.

No, that wouldn't be quite as funny as the film version, but neither is the laborious scene they've delivered instead, which betrays Michael's professionalism and hardly delivers any laughs. Even sillier is the scene a few weeks later. Michael Dorsey made national news...and they've fired him from the show? Not in a million years would any producer fire the lead of their musical who is suddenly the most famous actor in America and garnered free publicity any show would kill for. Michael would still be in the show without a doubt. The fallout of his behavior should be that they're all forced to act together, *despite* the entire cast and crew feeling betrayed by him. Let him face the mess he made as a man, without Dorothy to hide behind. Michael's apology to Julie would take place at work, not on a park bench somewhere after he's been canned.

END OF SPOILER

At the real curtain call, actor Santino Fontana takes his bow, disappears and comes back as Dorothy. It's a credit to him and the source material that I was glad to see her again. Everyone likes Dorothy. And then she starts tap-dancing in heels to furious applause. Why didn't they incorporate that fun talent earlier? Consider it one more lost opportunity.

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[White Noise](#) ** 1/2
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[Tootsie](#) ** 1/2

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