



THURSDAY, OCTOBER 03, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "Freestyle Love Supreme" and "Derren Brown: Secret" -- To Be Or Not To Be On Broadway

FREESTYLE LOVE SUPREME ** 1/2 out of ****

BOOTH THEATER

DERREN BROWN: SECRET *** out of ****

CORT THEATRE

What "belongs" on Broadway? Damn near anything, I say. Hip-hop improv? Why not? A magic show? Sure! Heck, it's in the grand tradition to let Broadway encompass everything in the world from lectures to circus acts to singers to one-person monologues to the most lavish extravaganza you can imagine. And a satisfying night out has nothing to do with big budgets or big casts. Give Elaine Stritch a microphone to talk or Bruce Springsteen a piano and a mic so he can talk and sing and you're guaranteed a good night.

A steady stream of musical stars are following in Bruce's wake to do concerts so they can tell the grandkids, "Hey, I played Broadway!" So I'm looking forward to David Byrne's brilliantly reviewed touring show *American Utopia*, the holiday spectacle *Slava's Snowshow*, Harry Connick Jr. tackling Cole Porter and whatever else comes this way.

There's one tiny problem: money. Some critics only deal with the art. Others are dismissed for seeing their job as purely a consumer's guide. I can't help doing both. I'm lucky to see many shows for free, but I do try to keep in mind I'm seeing stuff from the best seats in the house and I didn't pay for them. Did I enjoy seeing a show? Well, if I paid \$40, I might have one answer. If I paid \$400, I might well have another. One friend is a serious Springsteen fan and ponied up a lot of money to see the Boss's Broadway run. And yet he just couldn't get over paying that much money for the show, as satisfying on an artistic level as it may have been. It just rubbed him the wrong way and kept him from enjoying himself.



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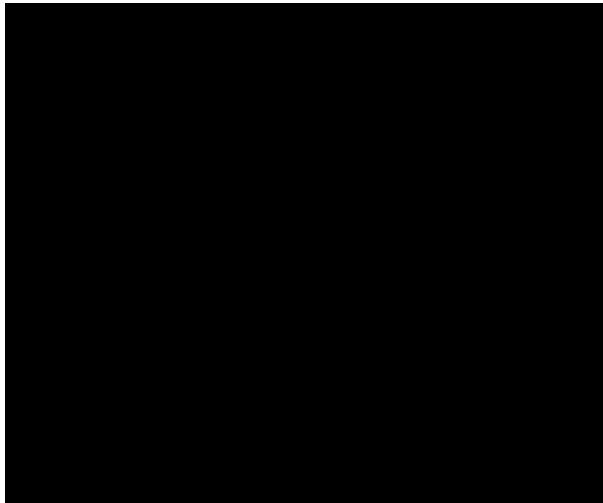
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On the other hand, I once paid more money than I ever did before for concert tickets to see Simon & Garfunkel in concert. And boy am I glad I did. Recently, I did the same to see Jake Gyllenhaal in *Sunday In The Park With George* -- for me, it was a *lot* of money. If I could afford it, I'd fly to London next summer and pay the same amount to see him in it again.

And it's not just the money. I saw *Betrayal* on Broadway and it was a pitch perfect presentation. If I saw that same play at Madison Square Garden (at any price), it just wouldn't work. It's the wrong space for that show. Some shows BELONG on Broadway for all sorts of reasons. And some don't.



Which bring me to *Freestyle Love Supreme*. Conceived by Anthony Veneziale and created by him, director Thomas Kail and Lin-Manuel Miranda, it's classic improv with a hip-hop twist. If you've ever seen an improv group, you know the drill. Audiences shout out ideas like a verb or a pet peeve or the like, the emcee chooses one and the cast goes to town. Instead of creating skits, in this case they create free-flowing raps. It's fun, genial, modestly entertaining and if it was Off Broadway at \$40-60, I'd highly recommend it to one and all.

On Broadway, at Broadway prices? Then I hesitate. It doesn't help that the performance I caught was not a barn-burner. The show surely can be better. But even at its best, it just feels like the sort of entertainment that should run and run Off Broadway a la *Stomp* and Blue Man Group. That said, Aneesa Folds was a very welcome female presence the night I caught it. I'm still not quite sure why she didn't come out with the rest of the guys at the start, but thank god she arrived soon after. The guest rapper was Christopher Jackson of *Hamilton*. (As long as the audience gets one of the original cast members of that landmark show, they may feel their Broadway bucks were well-spent.) And co-creator and emcee and all-around winning presence Veneziale set the perfect tone.

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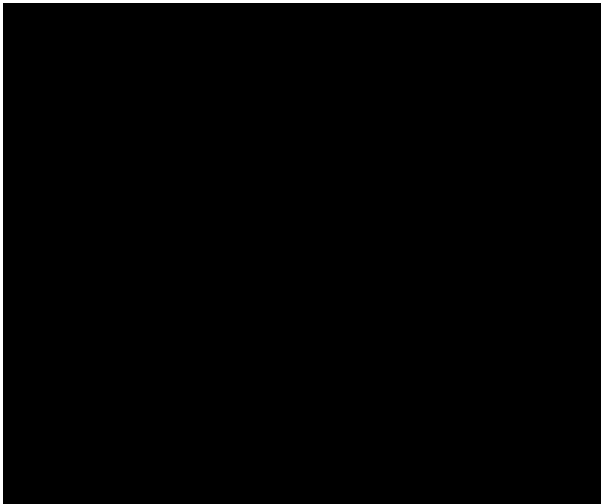
THEATER: "Freestyle Love Supreme" and "Derren Brow...

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The show climaxes with the group recreating the day of an audience member, with musician Arthur Lewis stepping up for some fun crooning to add variety to the vocals. Mine involved a woman who ran over her basketball-playing brother's foot and weirdly detoured into the brother being dead and the woman also plowing into a crowd of bystanders. Huh? Indeed, the highlights can't be planned or built into the show. You never know where they'll occur and for me it was Folds saying "Noooooooo!" repeatedly during a rant about raisins. Was it a pleasant evening? Absolutely. Would I recommend it? Ummm....



I had the opposite reaction to entertainer Derren Brown tackling Broadway. His show of "psychological manipulation" aka good old-fashioned magic/mentalism dressed up in science drag played like gangbusters Off Broadway and won a Drama Desk Award. No wonder. He's been a big hit in the UK for years, doing a string of TV specials and shows in the West End.

So any fears that Brown might not be able to "fill" a Broadway house with just his compelling patter were utter nonsense. He belongs onstage and knows it and the audience knows it too. Brown delivers a classic evening, from a modest stumble at the start (just so you know things don't always work out) to seemingly impossible acts of mind-reading (not that he calls it that) to a grand finale that leaves jaws dropping. On a second viewing, I especially enjoyed his gift for gab and the way Brown paces certain moments. Brown goes to great lengths to dress up his magician's skills at misdirection and manipulation as scientifically based.

Nonetheless, he knows how to hold a crowd. When he's doing what a lesser magician might call "mind-reading" and shouting out details that audience members want to keep secret, Brown seems barraged by psychic information. He stumbles this way and that, calling out the details of an audience member onstage but then veering off to reveal something about a member in the balcony and someone in the first few rows and then back to the person onstage, as if his mind is

absorbing it all and he can barely control the flow.

And it's all utter nonsense, as he repeatedly insists you remember, whether you want to embrace the pseudo-science he dishes up or play spoiler like me and try and figure out what he's doing when and where. (If you figure it all out, do give me a call. I'm still stumped. In other words, he's a terrific entertainer. To me, it was worth every penny. My guest when I saw it Off Broadway loved the big reveal at the end. My guest on Broadway felt played for a fool. No, he didn't think it was mentalism, but it was ALL manipulated by Brown from the start. It made him rather grumpy, which I must admit was fun for me. Some people just don't like magic.

Worth every penny? Yes, especially since Brown is not a big enough name to be charging Moulin Rouge! style prices. But what do I know? It turns out *Freestyle Love Supreme* is quite well at the box office the first few weeks while Derren Brown (despite very good reviews) is not tearing it up. Lucky you: that means you can see Brown on Broadway without breaking the bank. And everyone paying to see *Freestyle Love Supreme* is having fun and telling their friends. So what do I know? I loved the musical *Avenue Q*, but when they decided to leap to Broadway, I thought they were nuts. Off Broadway, I was sure it would run for years. On Broadway, I wasn't so sure. Would people pay top dollar? Would they be ready to see puppet sex on the Great White Way? After 2500 performances, I stopped wondering.

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POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 1:00 AM 

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