

Glenda Frank in New York

Summer may be the season for slackers, but New York theatre is a shark: always in motion. The solution for its “replenishing stock” this summer is British imports and that Broadway staple, the juke-box musical. Last year New York boasted a record number of visitors, sixty-five point two million, and 2019 seems poised to break that record – which means opportunity and risk for producers.

Winner of the 2017 *Evening Standard* Best Musical Award for the London Coliseum production, *Bat Out of Hell*, now at New York City Center, has music, lyrics, and book by Jim Steinman and songs made famous by singer Meat Loaf. One collaborative album was a best-seller for nine years. Steinman’s hard-hitting percussion is still the big draw in this disappointing production. The book is heavy-handed and bewildering in its convoluted plot but mostly in its curious perspective: that after eighteen, life is all downhill. The Lost, an outlawed tribe of homeless teenagers frozen in time by environmental pollution, is led by Strat (the gifted Andrew Polec who is either an extreme narcissist or just directed that way by Jay Scheib). Christina Bennington as Raven, his rich love interest, is fine despite the absence of any chemistry. Ironically, the stand-out performances are in the duelling duets and comic turns by Bradley Dean and Lena Hall, the villains (that means the adults, Raven’s parents, who disapprove of Strat). But they too long to be eighteen again – not innocent eighteen, but eighteen as in hot-to-trot. The echoes of *Peter Pan*, the *Rocky Horror Show*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Footloose* make the musical seem a little desperate.

I expected more than the irresistible rock beat and the smart, ironic lyrics that are in themselves little dramas. Take “Let Me Sleep on It”. It’s a duet in one (male) voice. The male is frantic for sex, but his girlfriend is holding out for a lifetime commitment (“Will you love me forever?”). The anti-romantic stance of “Two out of Three Ain’t Bad” is almost comical as he confesses lust and need, but he’s never going to love her. “I Would Do Anything for Love (But I Won’t Do That)” has its mystery. More romantic is “You Took the Words Right out of My Mouth”, but the song is prefaced by a dialogue with the male as wolf and the woman as his willing prey. Edgy!

On the other hand, *Moulin Rouge! The Musical* at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre is adept at walking along the razor’s edge of comic absurdity, sometimes turning self-mockery into gut-wrenching poignancy. It is a clever adaptation (book by John Logan) of the 2001 Baz Luhrmann film masterpiece with interesting tonal shifts. Yes, the elephant’s head and the windmill are landmarks in what may be the reddest set Derek McLane ever designed, and the costumes by Catherine Zuber are worthy of an exhibition. The razzle-dazzle is everywhere: cancan dancers, scantily clad sword swallows, fireworks, endless snatches of favourite songs, spirited choreography (Sonya Tayeh), and gonzo lighting (Justin Townsend). The naïve Christian (Aaron Tveit) still wins, loses, and again wins

Satine (Karen Olivo), the Quarter’s star courtesan/performer, but Nini (a compelling Robyn Hurder) and Santiago (the limber-limbed Ricky Rojas) stop the show with their hot (and comical) love duet/dance. In this version Christian gains instant admiration from Toulouse-Lautrec (a stand-out Sahr Ngaujah) when he ad libs lines from *The Sound of Music*.

“Marvellous” is a mild adjective for Danny Burstein as Harold Zidler, the Impresario with red and black fingernails and highly rouged cheeks. Casting Tam Mutu as the autocratic Duke of Monroth guaranteed a first-class performance, but it’s hard to believe that Satine could be totally immune to his considerable charisma. Director Alex Timbers (in *Beetlejuice*, reviewed in my *PIE* Summer 2019 New York report) may overdo it...but always with panache.

The revival of Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal* received a standing ovation at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre. (It transferred from London, where it was at the Harold Pinter Theatre; the review of *Betrayal* in London is in the Summer 2019 issue of *PIE*, page 15.) It is only ninety minutes on a minimalistic stage, but it felt like three hours to me. Director Jamie Lloyd allows the actors time for pauses and reactions – which I usually applaud, but the exaggeratedly slow pace kept taking me out of the play. I missed a dramatic thrust and felt that I was watching performances. Yes, by gifted actors in their Broadway debuts, but only performances nevertheless. Sometimes I even felt that the actors were posing. I remember that the 2013 production with Rachel Weisz, Daniel Craig, and Rafe Spall and directed by Mike Nichols at the Ethel Barrymore Theater had made all the longing and pain of the familiar play vividly alive.

Founded 1996 by artistic director Jim Simpson, actor Sigourney Weaver, designer Kyle Chepulis, and playwright Mac Wellman, the off-Broadway Flea Theatre made its

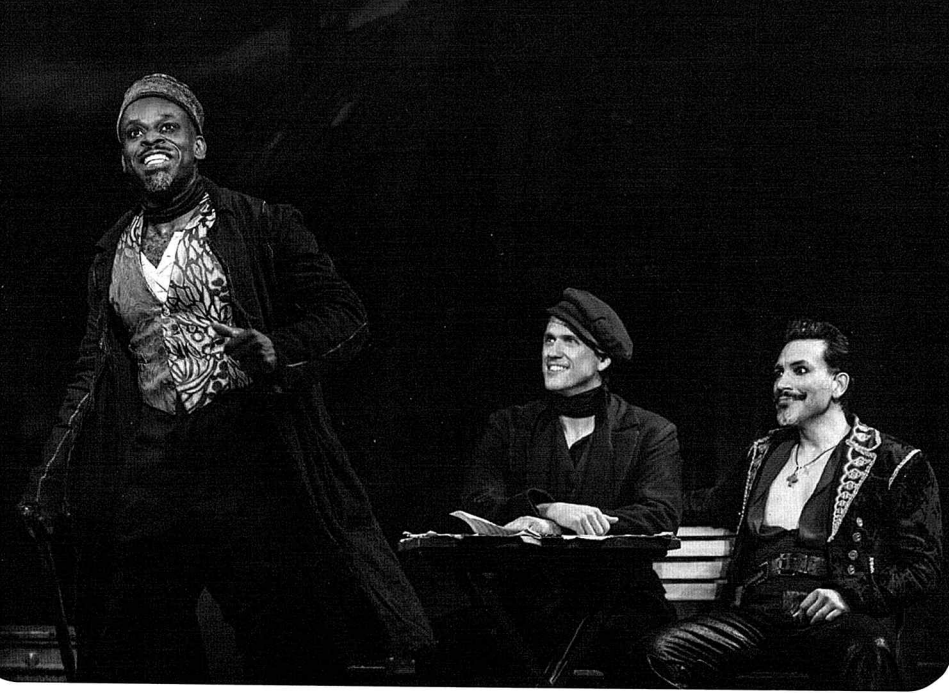
home in a small space in Tribeca, dedicated itself to new American plays, and welcomed film actors to the stage. The original five-year experiment was extended after producing director Carol Ostrow joined the team and the Twin Towers were attacked. The Flea commissioned its first play, *The Guys* by Anne Nelson, about a fire captain writing memorials for his fallen men. The play ran for fourteen months with a rotating cast. About that time The Flea formed a resident company, the Bats. (“A person would have to be bats to work off-off Broadway” one of the founders observed.) An Obie Award-winning non-Equity resident company, The Flea Theater now has over one hundred members and a spanking new expansive home on Thomas St. in Tribeca. Its 2019/2020 “Season of Anarchy: the Return of the Macs” features a festival devoted to Mac Wellman and writer/actor Taylor Mac. Until November 1, the current Wellmann play in the festival is *Perfect Catastrophes*. The festival opened with his *Bad Penny* and *Sincerity Forever*.

Wellmann, director of the playwriting program at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, has been shaping new playwrights for decades. He received a 2003 Lifetime Achievement Award from the highly influential but now defunct *Village Voice*. Wellman writes plays of ideas with no plot or character development; there are only clashing perspectives and supernatural overtones with a contemporary *deus ex machina* effect. The plays offer actors the opportunity to display their range.

Bad Penny, set in Central Park, opens on an ordinary New York day on the Astroturf in the Flea Theater’s backyard space. A woman, the lead actor, gives a long, interesting monologue about a haven in the sky (because it is empty and the earth is crowded) for damaged objects. A man with a flat automobile tire appears. He is looking for a gas station. Other



Karen Olivo as Satine and Tam Mutu as The Duke of Monroth in *Moulin Rouge! The Musical*.
Photo: Matthew Murphy.



Sahr Ngaujah as Toulouse-Lautrec, Aaron Tveit as Christian and Ricky Rojas as Santiago in *Moulin Rouge! The Musical*. Photo: Matthew Murphy.

characters which had previously mingled with the audience join the conversation, obsessing on their themes and challenging each other's beliefs. We recognize them as a cross section of New York life. The first woman is worried because she found a bad (in other words, cursed) penny. The tire guy takes it from her, and we watch his doom unfold. Odd. Haunting. And good performances by the Bats.

Although it dates back to the 1990, *Sincerity Forever* feels current. It is a satirical look at Southern racism in the small town of Hillsbottom. We get to meet the teen-agers behind the Ku Klux Klan hoods: their high school crushes, their violence, and their inane beliefs in a personally benevolent universe which does not include people of colour. Sometimes lines repeat, spoken by different characters to create tonal shifts, like when said by the heterosexual and the homosexual couples. They all boast that they are ignorant, but they claim "The most important thing is not what you know, but whether you're sincere or not". The town is experiencing a "mystic furball" epidemic when Jesus H. Christ arrives. She is an attractive black woman, and her presence offers its own unspoken commentary.

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BROADWAY LISTINGS

Ain't Too Proud, Imperial; *Aladdin* New Amsterdam; *Beautiful: Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *Beetlejuice*, Winter Garden; *Betrayal*, Bernard B. Jacobs; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *Come from Away*, Schoenfeld; *Dear Evan Hansen*, The Music Box; *Freestyle Love Supreme*, Booth; *Frozen St. James*; *Hadestown*, Walter Kerr; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, Lyric; *The Height of the Storm*, Friedman; *The Inheritance*, Barrymore; *The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical*, Longacre; *Linda Vista*, Second Stage; *Mean Girls*, August Wilson; *Moulin Rouge! The Musical*, Al Hirschfeld; *Oklahoma*, Circle in the Square; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *Sea Wall/ A Life*, Hudson; *Slave Play*, Golden; *The Sound Inside*, Studio 54; *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical*, Lunt-Fontanne; *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Shubert; *Tootsie*, Marquis; *Waitress*, Brooks Atkinson; *What the Constitution Means to Me*, Helen Hayes; *Wicked*, Gershwin.



Joseph Huffman far left, Emma Orme centre and Cast of *Bad Penny*. Photo: Allison Stock.

Amber Jaunai, Nate DeCook, and Vince Ryne in *Sincerity Forever*. Photo: Allison Stock.

