

# Glenda Frank in New York

The New York theatre season has two waves -- a gentle one beginning after the Tony Awards and a tsunami, rising in March and cresting in May. The innovations, talent, and polish of the productions of the second wave are a heady cocktail, restoring vitality to enervated critics.

But first: with a record 16 Tony nominations, *Hamilton* at the Richard Rodgers Theatre, with book, music, and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda, is the hottest ticket in town. Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle voters who consider all 16-week runs that open in New York for awards gave its approval to the *Hamilton* that was at the Public Theatre last year. *Hamilton* overflows with youth and minority talent. It is fresh and different, American history, and genuine rap but Broadway style and if you get tickets, you'll love it. Still, it has had competition.

Opening March 17, the revival of *She Loves Me*, a 1963 musical by Sheldon Harnick (lyrics), Jerry Bock (music), and Joe Masteroff (book) at Studio 54, is a valentine, but one with enough edge to feel contemporary. It is winning hearts and nominations: nine from Drama

Desk, and eight each from the Tony and Outer Critics Circle. Set in Maracek's Parfumerie, Budapest, 1934, the plot follows the rival store clerks, Amalia Balash (Laura Benanti, Tony Award for *Gypsy*) and Georg Nowack (Zachary Levi), as they realize their passion for each other while the worldly Ilona Ritter (the charismatic Jane Krakowski) as she dumps a charming Lothario (Gavin Creel), then discovers love in the library. From the beautifully orchestrated "Overture" with its overlapping voices, and the deliciously syncopated "Thank you, madam, please call again. Do call again, madam" chanted to customers by the aligned store personnel, to the hot dance numbers choreographed by Warren Carlyle, the show is proving itself timeless. Added to that are the period costumes (Jeff Mahshie), Impressionistic set designs (David Rockwell), and familiar old favorites like the titular "She Loves Me" and "Vanilla Ice Cream." Directed by Scott Ellis.

More exciting though is *American Psycho* (opening April 21) at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre, book by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, lively music and clever

lyrics by Duncan Sheik (*Spring Awakening*). It has been short-changed by critics and nominators alike. I am no fan of *Dexter*, a television series about a serial killer, or *The Following*, about a deranged cult leader, so I was leery about a show boasting a bloody protagonist. I was fooled by the marketing.

The production is fun, full of exhilarating surprises. Patrick Bateman, the "psycho" is a young Wall Streeter played by the singer-dancer-actor Benjamin Walker (*Bloody, Bloody Andrew Jackson*) with brilliant élan and high wattage sex appeal. All the blood-letting is probably metaphoric although the stage is covered in the red stuff. The musical provides a psychological window into Bateman's retire-at-35 world: the power parties, the beach scenes, the office politicking. Lynne Page's choreography is fast, crisp, angular, and graceful (but do not think *Swan Lake*.) Matching it in invention and variety are the glam costumes designed by Katrina Lindsay, high rent sets by Es Devlin and rock star lighting by Justin Townsend (*Casa Valentina*).

Turn off the words and *American Psycho* is a full sensory

experience, but what drew me was how the metaphors of "killing" and "making a killing" on the market conflate. Bateman is complex: pure Alpha to his male co-workers, a little cowed by his ambitious fiancée (Anna Eilinsfeld), tender toward his infatuated assistant (Jennifer Damiano) and a good boy to his mom (Alice Ripley). Director Rupert Goold (*King Charles III*) pulled it all together with pizzazz and class.

Two revivals of classic American drama are a must-see. Everything director Ivo van Hove (*A View from the Bridge*) touches becomes new and controversial. *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller at the Walter Kerr Theatre is the best of his best.

He walks with ease the fine line between an auteur and a director who is faithful to the script. From the get-go he



American Psycho. Photo: Jeremy Daniel.

reshapes our vision of the play, opening it in a modern school room with seated female students. This mute, added scene provides a reference point for the whole. Each new scene (in the Proctor home, the court room) takes place within the classroom context – reminding us that the mean girls are in control.

As the play opens, the Reverend Parris's daughter (Elizabeth Teeter) has fallen into a coma after being caught in the woods dancing with her friends. The girls, terrified of being accused of witchcraft, denounce various townspeople. In early scenes they are signalled by long blonde hair. Mrs. Putnam, an older woman who also makes early accusations, has long blonde hair. In contrast, Elizabeth Proctor, the voice of integrity and love, is played by a black woman (Sophie Okonedo, Tony for *A Raisin in the Sun*). Working against type, van Hove cast Ben Whishaw, with his delicate features, as John Proctor. The iconoclastic casting shook me from knee-jerk assumptions and made me a little uncomfortable, just enough to goad me to watch the characters more closely. I was well rewarded: many of the minor

characters enjoyed their own arias. Perhaps it was the lighting by Jan Versweyveld or maybe I missed them in earlier productions.

The most dramatic scene, when the girls pretend that someone has sent her spirit out to torment them, is a powerhouse of terror, bringing together the accusations of witchcraft and communism, a naming that alone is a condemnation. This is everyone's nightmare. The scene is followed by even more powerful theatre as John Proctor wrestles with the public posting of his confession. Whishaw, a slight man, fills the large space with his agony. The loss of his name – not death – is the ultimate injustice. He tears up the false confession, which would have saved his life. His wife explains that he has "found his goodness," a phrase that had formerly seemed a clumsy understatement to me. But now I was and still am deeply moved by it. The costumes by Wojciech Dziedzic evoke the Gap, Eileen Fischer, and timeless classics.

Like Coleridge commenting on *Hamlet*, I did not think anyone could create a *Long Day's Journey into Night* richer than that in my imagination, but director Jonathan

Kent at the American Airlines Theatre has done it, thanks in part to a stellar cast. I have seen schizophrenic, raving, depressed, and unbalanced Mary Tyrones, but none like Jessica Lange's. The actor made sense of the script's quick emotional shifts through subtext, varied pacing and tonal shifts, and that indefinable magic of the finest performers. The role is so juicy that sometimes performers forget they are part of a quartet, but Lange plays well with others. The others include Gabriel Byrne (*A Touch of the Poet*), Michael Shannon (*Grace*), and John Gallagher, Jr. (Tony for *Spring Awakening*). Shannon's performance is eccentric, highlighting not the son but the Broadway sport with his quick delivery and period slang. He brings it all home, though, in the final scenes – and they are the ones that wrench the heart. Gabriel Byrne is THE VOICE, another name for matinee idol James Tyrone. His Irish lilt and effortless charm make credible Tyrone's stage popularity (which most productions ignore) and why Mary fell so in love with him.

Kent, the Artistic Director of the Almeida Theatre, is a

remarkable director. He cast the stage production in part as a radio play: we know the characters through their voices, pauses, inflections. And then he added inspired blocking – lots of inconspicuous touching to reassure and connect – plus subtle lighting by Natasha Katz. The little things matter so much. Kent replaced the four chairs around the family table in the script with two, which brought conversation closer to confrontation and polarized the play. The bones of the script are clean and strong, and the director trusted O'Neill enough to make them subtly visible.

## BROADWAY LISTINGS

*An Act of God*, Booth Theatre; *Aladdin*, New Amsterdam; *American Psycho*, Schoenfeld; *An American in Paris*, Palace; *Arthur Miller's The Crucible*, Walter Kerr; *Beautiful - the Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *Bright Star*, Cort; *Cats*, Neil Simon; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *Cirque du Soleil, Paramour*, Lyric; *The Color Purple*, Bernard B. Jacobs; *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Barrymore; *Fiddler on the Roof*, Broadway; *Finding Neverland*, Lunt-Fontanne; *Fully Committed*, Lyceum; *Fun Home*, Circle in the Square; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *The Humans*, Helen Hayes; *Jersey Boys*, August Wilson; *The King and I*, Vivian Beaumont; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *Les Misérables*, Imperial; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *Long Day's Journey into Night*, American Airlines; *Matilda the Musical*, Shubert; *Motown the Musical*, Nederlander; *On Your Feet*, Marquis; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *School of Rock*, Winter Garden; *She Loves Me*, Studio 54; *Shuffle Along*, Music Box; *Something Rotten*, St. James; *Tuck Everlasting*, Broadhurst; *Waitress*, Brooks Atkinson; *Wicked*, Gershwin.

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Jane Krakowski and Gavin Creel in Roundabout Theatre Company's *She Loves Me*. Photo: Joan Marcus.