

Glenda Frank in New York

Different strokes for different audiences. Some prefer plays that are leisurely carriage rides through Central Park. Some are excited by celebrity sightings. And others long for theatre that teases the imagination, offering a hike up scenic slopes: this is Bernard Shaw's audience, and Tom Stoppard's. A few plays this season were designed for the intrepid and the curious; for audiences who want to know how the world turns and will work along – as long as the drama and comedy hold.

Junk: *The Golden Age of Debt* at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center is Grade A honey in the hive. Playwright Ayad Akhtar is fascinated by power. In *Disgraced* (Tony nomination and Pulitzer Prize), a Pakistani-American lawyer vying for a promotion is sidelined after attending a trial of an alleged terrorist. His wife walks out. One wrong decision and the house of cards tumbles. In *The Invisible Hand* (Obie Award, Evening Standard and Olivier nominations) a financier kidnapped by terrorists teaches his captor (too well) how to manipulate the market to raise funds for his release. Every step is a new negotiation.

Junk (i.e., junk bonds and hedge funds) is a roller coaster, a high speed junket through the 1985 rise and fall of multimillionaire Robert Merkin (Steven Pasquale, *The Bridges of Madison County*). Behind him the ticker tapes (projection design by 59 Productions) change at a dizzying pace. The 20 or so multiracial characters in their silk shirts and Brooks Brothers suits (costumes by Catherine Zuber) are crisp and focused, always smart, always looking for the next opportunity –

whether it's love, double digit gains, breaking a case of stock market fraud, or beating the competition. Akhtar has created multiple vignettes, multiple stories of people who cross paths. We are a fly on the wall, an eavesdropper as fortunes are made, men destroyed, love found and lost, and crimes punished.

Don't know finance? Don't worry. The writing is lucid, as is the web that snares them all. Israel Peterman (Matthew Rauch) hopes to diversify his business – maybe into the more profitable pharmaceuticals. Thomas Everson (Rick Holmes) is bolstering his antiquated steel plant with a pharmaceutical venture, but he doesn't want to sell. So banker Merkin inflates Peterman's offer by floating low grade bonds based on debt. Debt is an asset, he tells the jittery client. Multimillionaire Leo Tresler (a charismatic Michael Siberry) jumps into the mix, but he just can't compete with Merkin's ploys. It's old school (WASP) money against the Ivy League newbies.

Finance may be forestage, but the drama is about the people – their dreams, their friendships, their fears, their greed. Intelligible plays about finance are rare. In 1931, Bertolt Brecht finished *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* and in it his Joan Dark, a soup kitchen idealist, must choose between evils. Either she accepts Pierpont Mauler's offer of much-needed funds or she refuses the money because he manipulates markets. In 1989 Jerry Sterner won kudos for *Other People's Money*, about Larry the Liquidator who dissects companies to sell the parts. *Junk* is based loosely on the Michael Milken scandal and has echoes of *Macbeth*. Lady Merkin (Miriam

Silverman), her husband's co-planner, is nursing a baby and voices a discrete perspective. But the game isn't the good guys versus the bad. At the close Merkin displays surprising integrity although he is still juggling numbers. (In his book *Telecosm*, economist George Gilder claimed that "Milken was a key source of the organizational changes that have impelled economic growth over the last twenty years. Most striking was the productivity surge in capital, as Milken...and others took the vast sums trapped in old-line businesses and put them back into the markets.")

Director Doug Hughes choreographed the conflicting forces with unflinching verve and incisiveness. His blocking kept the stage alive. The split-level, boxed acting spaces (John Lee Beatty, set) and high-drama lighting (Ben Stanton) create intimate, connecting worlds. The plot travels from bedroom to bank to board meetings in Reading, Pennsylvania, Beverly Hills, and New York. "This is a story of kings", says Judy Chen (Teresa Avia Lim), a financial journalist and our sometimes guide. "Or what passes for kings these days".

Jesus Hopped the "A" Train (2000) by Stephen Adly Guirgis's (2015 Pulitzer Prize for *Between Riverside and Crazy*) is a small masterpiece. In the hands of director Mark Brokaw this off-Broadway revival at Signature Theatre is compelling. It begins and ends with failed prayers. Angel Cruz (Sean Carvajal), who attacked a cult leader for stealing his friend, cannot remember the words to the Lord's prayer. ("Harold be thy name.") In desperation he recites the first few sentences louder and louder as the

L to R - Sean Carvajal, Ricardo Chavira and Edi Gathegi in *Jesus Hopped the "A" Train*. Photo: Joan Marcus.





Joey Slotnick (centre) and the company in *Junk*. Photo: T. Charles Erickson.

cellblock shouts him down. But his prayers may have been heard when he meets the hyperactive Lucius Jenkins (Edi Gathegi), a serial killer who is intoxicated with God. His non-stop calisthenics coupled with rich linguistic rantings are mesmerizing. It's a bravura performance. Angel is a sceptic, but one of the guards is so seduced he brings Lucius special-order cookies. Only slowly do we learn why Lucius has surrounded himself in a bubble of God's forgiveness.

Jesus Hopped the "A" Train is funny, touching, and profound in ways that rock your soul. It is about honesty, justice, and human contradiction. The convicts are delusional. Lucius Jenkins is a sociopath. But Angel Cruz's lawyer (Stephanie DiMaggio) is corrupt because she wants to be and needs to be to get her guilty clients released. Angel is almost freed. Tutored in a performance of remorse, he feels the sorrow and confesses. And Lucius too, fighting extradition to Florida which has the death penalty, fears judgment. Overseeing these men are two guards, the one who buys the cookies and the one who denigrates them. On stage are the clean lines of the prison cages (designer Riccardo Hernandez) and the sliver of sunlight (designer Scott Zielinski) that brings Lucius hope.

John Patrick Shanley, author of *Moonstruck*, *Doubt* (Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize), and the film *Joe Versus the Volcano* is back where he belongs with *The Portuguese Kid*, a belly-laugh comedy about star-crossed love and money. Jason Alexander (six Emmys for *Seinfeld*) plays Barry Dragonetti, a lawyer transformed right before our eyes from a stiff, pudgy, bald guy into a romantic hero whom we root for. Comedian Sherie Rene Scott (*The Front Page*) is Atalanta, a vivacious widow who has called out Barry's name during sex with husbands number one and number two. She is such a welcome figure to the stage: a beautiful older woman who

is refreshingly intelligent, boldly honest and – yes – wacky. "I have a dark side," she confesses. But the loudest cheers are for Mary Testa (*Wicked* as well as multiple award nominations) as Barry's relentlessly overbearing mother who eavesdrops, interrupts, and name-calls – her special form of attack. Language is her forte but Atalanta meets her barrage for barrage, comic vituperation for vituperation.

The Band's Visit (book by Itamar Moses, based on the 2007 screenplay by Eran Kolirin) at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre is a bittersweet musical about the 1996 chance encounter of the Alexandria Ceremonial Police Orchestra and the denizens of a desert village in Israel, Beit Hatikva (not Petah Tikva, the town where the Egyptian band is to perform for the opening of an Arab Cultural Center). The town is too small for a hotel, but it opens its homes and hearts to the stranded musicians. The tunes (David Yazbek, music and lyrics) run the gamut from Arabic and Israeli to jazz. Tony Shalhoub (Tony nomination for *The Price*) plays the widowed conductor who carries the guilt for his son's suicide. Katrina Lenk (*Indecent*) is Dina, the sexy café owner who befriends him. The overnight encounter and brief moments of joy help to balance the longings and sadness of these lives. It is a musical for audiences who loved *Once*. I admired how director David Cromer had the actors pause before speaking. You could sense them translating from their native language to English as they shared their secrets with strangers in a foreign tongue.

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BROADWAY LISTINGS

Aladdin, New Amsterdam; *Anastasia*, Broadhurst; *The Band's Visit*, Ethel Barrymore; *Beautiful: Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *A Bronx Tale – The Musical*, Longacre; *Cats*, Neil Simon; *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Lunt-Fontanne; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *The Children*, Samuel J. Friedman; *Come from Away*, Schoenfeld; *Dear Evan Hansen*, The Music Box; *Farinelli and the King*, Belasco; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Hello Dolly*, Shubert; *Home for the Holidays*, August Wilson; *John Lithgow: Stories by Heart*, American Airlines; *Junk*, Vivian Beaumont; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *Latin History for Morons*, Studio 54; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *M. Butterfly*, Cort; *Meteor Shower*, Booth; *Miss Saigon*, Broadway; *Once on this Island*, Circle in the Square; *The Parisian Woman*, Hudson; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *The Play that Goes Wrong*, Lyceum; *School of Rock*, Winter Garden; *SpongeBob SquarePants*, Palace; *Waitress*, Brooks Atkinson; *Wicked*, Gershwin.

