

Glenda Frank in New York

For those of us who vote for the Outer Critics Circle and Drama Desk awards, April and May can be exhausting. There are dozens of new openings – from off-off-Broadway to the larger stages – and we have to cram the shows we missed (or avoided) into the schedule because they are on the ballots. The thrill before the lights dim – critic Sylvie Drake compared it to going on a blind date – is often mixed with a desperate need for coffee. But not this year.

In each incarnation, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* rewrites itself. I remember the wonder I felt at the Broadway premiere in 1993 seeing Stephen Spinella's terrified, skeletal Prior Walter, Ellen Laughlin's "I – I – I" Angel with enormous white wings crashing through the ceiling, and Ron Leibman's Roy Cohn bruising the very air. In 2014 when it was playing in New York, Ivo van Hove stripped Kushner's work down to eight Toneelgroep actors wearing ordinary attire and speaking Dutch accompanied by a little table, a phonograph, and supertitles. No angel wings, no angel but someone in a white medical coat; no ascent, no turntables, but a David Bowie soundtrack. *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* were conflated into five hours. Characters moved between multiple stations across the large stage of the Harvey Theatre, Brooklyn Academy of Music, in Jan Versweyveld's moody lighting. I missed the Angel, missed familiar moments and colourful costumes, grew tired looking and reading at once, and then... something clicked. I felt the play, not just scenes but the whole – the stalking imminence of death, the loneliness, the madness, and the desperate need for human affection.

This time around, I had no idea what to expect from director Marianne Elliott who, along with Chris Harper, brought the production over from London's National Theatre to the Neil Simon Theatre. Because of scheduling, I saw *Perestroika* (the second segment, almost four hours long) first. The angel (Amanda Lawrence) rises from what seems to be soiled newspapers on the group, her enormous wings worked with poles by what the program labels "Angel Shadows" (puppeteers). She delivers her lines while striding across their shoulders and in a rig to simulate flying as though she were standing on solid footing. The effect is both surreal and ordinary, very unsettling and very effective. It no longer seemed like a dramatic flourish. Susan Brown (nominated for Featured Actress) did not parody any of her five roles but rather made each discrete and memorable, especially Ethel Rosenberg and Joe Pitt's mother. But the biggest surprise was the lovely Denise Gough as Harper Pitt (Tony nomination). With assurance instead of a Valium-whine, she tells Mr. Lies (Nathan Stewart-Jarrett) that she can have an Eskimo and a tree in Antarctica because this is her fantasy. The performance prepared us for her demanding Joe's credit card when she left him. Well-deserved Tony nominations for Nathan Lane as Cohn, Andrew Garfield as Prior, Ian MacNeil for sets, Paule Constable for light design, Nicky Gillibrand for costumes and, once more, director Elliot.



Denise Gough as Harper Pitt and Nathan Stewart-Jarrett as Belize in *Angels in America*.
Photo: Brinkhoff Mögenburg.

The American premiere of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, written by Jack Thorne and directed by John Tiffany at the enormous Lyric Theatre, is another double-header (almost three hours each) and the talk of the town. Since I'm not a Potterhead and a friend's helpful hints gave me a headache, I appreciated the production for its presentational values. Audience cheering was louder for Part Two, but I preferred Part One.

Part One follows Albus Severus Potter (Sam Clemmett), Harry's awkward middle son, as he and his friend Scorpius (Anthony Boyle) struggle to fit in to Hogwarts. Later they attempt time travel to right a wrong by bringing back Cedric Diggory (Benjamin Wheelwright). In Part Two the boys explore several alternate universes, each time failing to revive Diggory. The play ends with them trapping the witch (Jessie Fisher), villain Voldemort's powerful daughter.

There are several stand-out effects, one being the choreography (Steven Hoggett) of the cloaks (costumes by Katrina Lindsay): teachers and children swirl their academic attire – a cross between whirling dervishes, fashion models, and blackbirds in the wind. It is impressive – for a while. The cloaks are employed again in a magic

feat as the few (actors) become the many in a sleight-of-foot that almost fills the stage. I was enchanted, but like other stage innovations it is a visual leitmotif that grew tiresome with overuse. In fact, after a while the multiple, moving staircases made me dizzy.

The library scene in the Ministry of Magic was mesmerizing. The children were searching for a forbidden volume. The bookcases sucked them in and spit out their parents, sucked in the parents and spit out the children in a farcical speed-dial frenzy. Time was malleable: the onstage clocks whirred and light vibrated. The Transfiguration and ghostlike Death Eaters flying over our heads were fun. Excellent performances by all, but Anthony Boyle as Scorpius Malfoy and Noma Dumezweni as the grown Hermione Granger were stand outs. Good thing ticket sales are brisk (over two million dollars one week, a new record) because the show cost sixty-eight million dollars to mount, another Broadway first for a non-musical.



Cast of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. Photo: Manuel Harlan.

SpongeBob *SquarePants*, co-conceived and directed by Tina Landau at the Palace Theatre, is sheer joy! Who could have guessed that a Nickelodeon TV cartoon character would inspire such creative pizzazz! There are heroes, there are villains, there are outsized and wonderful performances, comically bizarre sets and costumes (David Zinn), all winning the show twelve Tony and eleven Drama Desk nominations including for best musical, book, score, orchestration, choreography, set, lighting, and for many performances. The story about a greedy couple and an erupting volcano is at once silly and resonating with contemporary political events. SpongeBob (Ethan Slater, goofy, tireless, and so talented) begins a grassroots movement when the Mayor proves ineffective against the disaster. Lilli Cooper as Sandy Cheeks invents devices to protect the town. Unexpected volunteers (Super Sea Star Savior) struggle beyond their limits and succeed ("Hero Is My Middle Name"). Friendship is strained but ultimately triumphs. Mostly it's lively dance routines (Christopher Gattelli) and a good score! The kids in the audience and the kid in us cheered!

Cominee and a 2017 Tony nominee for *A Doll's House, Part Two*. Her performance in George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre is magnetic. Director Daniel Sullivan has found comedy and brilliant dramaturgy in what once seemed a talky play.

I may be the only critic who is not a fan of *The Band's Visit* at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. The performances were first-rate, especially from Tony Shalhoub and Katrina Lenk as the principals. But the story is depressing. Two women are unhappy at the beginning and at the end. One is a wife who married a dull slacker, lives with her family, and has a colicky baby. The other is a single woman who puts herself out – and encourages the townspeople of her small Israeli town to follow her lead – in welcoming the Egyptian strangers who are the visiting band. She reaches out to the band leader. Their emotional bond is strong, but he has no romantic interest in her. She has opened his heart, and he bonds with a young musician, a replacement for the son he did not understand. Another musician, dismayed about his impending arranged marriage, comforts her, and the band leaves.

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BROADWAY LISTINGS

Aladdin, New Amsterdam; *Anastasia*, Broadhurst; *Angels in America*, Neil Simon; *The Band's Visit*, Ethel Barrymore; *Beautiful: Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *The Boys in the Band*, Booth; *A Bronx Tale – The Musical*, Longacre; *Carousel*, Imperial; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *Come from Away*, Schoenfeld; *Dear Evan Hansen*, The Music Box; *Escape to Margaritaville*, Marquis; *Frozen*, St. James; *Getting' the Band Back Together*, Belasco; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, Lyric; *Head over Heels*, Hudson; *Hello Dolly*, Shubert; *The Iceman Cometh*, Bernard B. Jacobs; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *Mean Girls*, August Wilson; *My Fair Lady*, Vivian Beaumont; *Once on this Island*, Circle in the Square; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *Pretty Woman the Musical*, Nederlander; *The Play that Goes Wrong*, Lyceum; *School of Rock*, Winter Garden; *SpongeBob SquarePants*, Palace; *Springsteen on Broadway*, Walter Kerr; *Straight White Men*, Helen Hayes; *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical*, Lunt-Fontanne; *Three Tall Women*, Golden; *Waitress*, Brooks Atkinson; *Wicked*, Gershwin.