

# Glenda Frank in New York

Sam Gold, who directed the brilliant and iconoclastic *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Doll's House, Part 2* this season, declared "This is a year of indefatigable women." The Broadway marquee tells the tale: *Waitress*, *War Paint* (about battling cosmetic giants), *Hello, Dolly*, *Anastasia, Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, and *The Little Foxes*.

Although we may not reach half-and-half in 2020, the battle for gender equality in theatre has been making strides. The Lilly Awards is now in its eighth season. Named for Lillian Hellman, it was created by playwrights Theresa Rebeck, Julia Jordan, and Marsha Norman to honour women in the theatre. In partnership with the Dramatists Guild, they created a study project called *The Count* which looks at playwrights and examines how gender and race are represented annually in national non-Broadway productions. The League of Professional Theatre Women, formed in 1980, is a New York based international advocacy and support organization. Dedicated to promoting the visibility of all theatre women, it sponsors six awards: from beginning artists to lifetime achievement, from designers to artistic directors.

This has been a successful season. Bette Midler in *Hello, Dolly* and Glenn Close in *Sunset Boulevard* are bringing 1,000-watt performances to these Broadway revivals. These stars do not need a movement to support them. Carole King arrived on Broadway with a solid fan-base, but even so *Beautiful* ("feel the earth move") has surpassed expectations. Although it has run since November 2013, it earned almost a million dollars in one May week alone. It's hard not to love the music, and the story (book by Douglas McGrath, direction by Marc Bruni) of a songwriter who wrote her first hit at 17 is devastating, when, at the top of her game, she has to battle personal loss. Her comeback is a celebration. Jessie Mueller, who played the first Carole on Broadway, left the show to open as the lead in *Waitress*, which is currently earning 123% of its gross potential. *Waitress*, based on the film written by Adrienne Shelly, has a book by Jessie Nelson, music and lyrics by Sara Bareilles, and staging by Diane Paulus (2013 Tony Award for *Pippin*). Paulus is currently a producer of *Natasha, Pierre, & The Great Comet of 1812* directed by Rachel Chavkin, which has won multiple Tony Award nominations. In its third version, it is the most exciting show on Broadway. The Outer Critics Circle, Tony and Drama Desk award committees have recognized Mimi Lien's beautiful, multifunctional set design for the show.

The revival of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1939) directed by Daniel Sullivan at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, and *War Paint* directed by Michael Greif at the Nederlander Theatre, adopted a different approach: twin stars who alternate in each other's roles. Long a ticket sweetener by male actors – Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud

sharing Romeo and Mercutio; Edwin Booth and James O'Neill in *Othello* – female role-switching in *The Little Foxes* – the night I saw it, Cynthia Nixon as Birdie and Laura Linney as Regina – has garnered much press and many award nominations. Cast against type, the assertive Cynthia Nixon is a revelation. She brings us a different Birdie. She allows us a glimpse of how she had been before her marriage to Oscar Hubbard (Darren Goldstein), one of those businessmen who "eat the earth like locusts": Intelligent, vivacious, and charming during dinner, she is soon put in her place by Oscar, first with verbal and then with physical abuse. She disappears into the scenery right before our eyes. Usually played as saccharine and submissive, this Birdie chooses to live in a bottle rather than explode, but we know the despair. When Birdie steps in to save her niece from an arranged marriage to her brutal son (Michael Benz), she shows not hysterical fluttering but maternal determination and feminist bonding. I think Hellman would have applauded.

Laura Linney, who was an ideal Elizabeth Proctor in *The Crucible*, wears the polished steel of Regina Hubbard well, even when refusing her dying husband his medicine and bullying her brothers into allowing her a larger profit share. When brother Ben (Michael McKean) tells her a lady's strength lies in gentility, we understand the devils Regina must battle to escape from her velvet prison, but I did not feel the struggle within. When Bette Davis in the 1941 film cries for her daughter not to leave her, the heartbreak and isolation she communicated were horrible and provided the drama with a tragic magnitude that is absent here.

**W**ar Paint is a new musical about entrepreneurs Elizabeth Arden (Christine Ebersole) and Helena Rubinstein (Patti LuPone). Doug Wright, who won a Tony Award for *I Am My Own Wife*, wrote the book. Music is by Scott Frankel and lyrics by Michael Korie. The three were also the creative team for *Grey Gardens* (2006). It is a joy to watch these women compete, lose their men, find others, and keep focused on their legacy. They rule different sides of the stage, mirroring the business rivalry. Only in a final, fictional scene do they meet, but they were always on each other's mind and shared several songs (*My American Moment* and *Face to Face*). Arden was a country girl from Canada who found success in sophisticated packaging, salon pampering, and her outreach to suffragists. Rubinstein, an immigrant from Poland, brought beauty formulas with her which she continually perfected, as the song *Back on Top* tells. With her wealth she became a patron of the arts and a philanthropist. Both were called before Congress and questioned about toxicity; this is a surprising and most welcome scene in a Broadway musical. Patti LuPone and Christine Ebersole fully embodied these fascinating, complex

businesswomen and their marvellous range of emotions in both performance and song.

Few shows have split the theatre community as drastically as Sam Gold's bold revival of *The Glass Menagerie*. Literalists are dismayed, but for the first time I feel that Amanda (Sally Field), a single mother with a handicapped daughter, is depicted with respect and love. Even the dress that she pulls from the trunk to wear for 'The Gentleman Caller', pink tulle which is far too youthful in style, is neither bizarre nor embarrassing. Sally Field is superb. While her words may nag, her voice does not. We hear Tennessee Williams' poetry. The author gave her many of the most interesting lines; Amanda is smart, has a range of knowledge, and is so trapped. Gold's directorial choices make *The Glass Menagerie* Amanda's play as much as Laura's or Tom's.

It opens with Tom (the excellent Joe Mantello) leading us slowly back to 1937. He is playing a scratchy record on the Victrola. This is a memory play. With his greying hair, he looks as old as Amanda. His body language confesses his compassion for but also exasperation with his mother. We meet Amanda climbing the steps to the stage, lugging a heavy wheelchair. We meet Laura (Madison Ferris) crawling up the stairs and along the stage; this is an actor with muscular dystrophy. People complain that this Laura is not true to the script, but Gold comes from a different directorial perspective. He is reaching for emotional truth.

**A** Doll's House, Part 2 by Lucas Hnath, directed by Sam Gold, was a much anticipated production. It reviewed well, but I was all around disappointed. Laurie Metcalf, a gifted comedian, was miscast. Too often she struck mannered poses: leaned against the wall (perhaps a symbolic gesture), sat with splayed legs, and proved time and again that she was not Ibsen's Nora. (David Zinn costumed her in peacock colours.) The division of the play by characters, as indicated by projections, was clever; and the talky play in a minimalist set by Miriam Buether has a dramatic arc. But it is neither believable nor engaging once our curiosity is satisfied about what Nora has been doing in the 15 years after "the door slam heard around the world". Jayne Houdyshell, the nanny who reared Nora and Nora's children, played a stock character who too often got laughs by uttering profanities. Condola Rashad brought a bravura performance to Emmy, Nora's clever, loquacious but slight batty daughter with an illegal plan to save her father's reputation.

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Jennifer Rias, Steffanie Leigh, Christine Ebersole, Mary Claire King, Stephanie Jae Park in *War Paint*. Photo: Joan Marcus.

## BROADWAY LISTINGS

1984, Hudson; *Aladdin*, New Amsterdam; *Anastasia*, Broadhurst; *Bandstand*, Bernard B. Jacobs; *Beautiful: Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *A Bronx Tale – The Musical*, Longacre; *Cats*, Neil Simon; *Cats*, Neil Simon; *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Lunt-Fontanne; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *Come from Away*, Schoenfeld; *Dear Evan Hansen*, The Music Box; *A Doll's House, Part 2*, John Golden; *The Glass Menagerie*, Belasco; *The Great Comet*, Imperial; *Groundhog Day the Musical*, August Wilson; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Hello Dolly*, Shubert; *Indecent*, Cort; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *The Little Foxes*, Samuel J. Friedman; *Marvin's Room*, American Airlines; *Miss Saigon*, Broadway; *On Your Feet*, Marquis; *Oslo*, Vivian Beaumont; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *The Play that Goes Wrong*, Lyceum; *The Present*, Ethel Barrymore; *Present Laughter*, St. James; *Prince of Broadway*, Samuel J. Friedman; *School of Rock*, Winter Garden; *Six Degrees of Separation*, Ethel Barrymore; *Sunset Boulevard*, Palace; *Sweat*, Studio 54; *The Terms of My Surrender*, Belasco; *Waitress*, Brooks Atkinson; *War Paint*, Nederlander; *Wicked*, Gershwin.



Laura Linney as Regina Giddens and Cynthia Nixon as Birdie Hubbard in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*. Photo: Joan Marcus.

