



New York Theatre Wiresm

Theatre Dance Performance Art Music
Alternative and International Theatre

"THE LEHMAN TRILOGY"

[Glenda Frank](#)

"The Lehman Trilogy" Absolute theatre magic!



Photo by Caroline Shadle.

**From 22 March to 20 April, 2019.
Mon. – Thurs. at 7 PM; Fri. – Sat. at 7:30 PM; Sat.
at 1 PM.**

Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Avenue, NYC.

Tickets: \$45-\$1256; online

<https://www.viagogo.com/Theater-Tickets/Theater/The-Lehman-Trilogy-Tickets/E-3401868>.

**"The Lehman Trilogy" by Stefano Massini,
adapted by Ben Power. Directed by Sam
Mendes.**

Reviewed by Glenda Frank.

"The Lehman Trilogy," in a limited run at the New York Armory, is almost four hours long and features three actors in a glasslike cage. What can you expect from this? Absolute theatre magic! The production, directed by Sam Mendes ("American Beauty"), is mesmerizing.

The trilogy tells the story of the three generations of the family that built the financial behemoth, which folded in 2008. The giant transparent cubicle (Es Devlin, set design) revolves to provide various interiors. The pictorial backdrop (Luke Halls, video design) sets the scenes, changing for place and time, even for major events like the cotton fire that devastated Alabama in the 1850s. And the reflecting floor (Jon Clark, lighting) makes the whole seem – at times -- to be floating in a high rise far above the city.

The three actors who play a multitude of genders and ages, tap our imaginations in ways that are more than impressive. When Simon Beal (named the greatest stage actor

of his generation), a stout, bearded man of a certain age, transforms into a slender young woman being courted by one of the original Lehman brothers, we witness the courtship. The limited number of actors and sets keeps our minds focused on (fascinated by!) the story of the family. Lines repeat, like an incantation.

Characterization is quick and vivid. We are reminded at key moments that Henry Lehman, the oldest Lehman brother, is the Head. He makes the decision. Emanuel (Ben Miles, Tony nomination for "Wolf Hall") is the Shoulder; he carries them out. And Mendel (Adam Godly, Tony and Drama Desk awards nominations for "Anything Goes"), the youngest, is the Potato, smooth, a peace zone between the two brothers – who they discover has some brilliant ideas of his own. The men first sell to Straw Hats (Alabama locals) but as business grows, they sell to the Big Cigars and later strike up a lucrative bargain with Perfect Hands, a wealthy factory owner in the North.

The actors are clad in modern dress and somber colors. While the several rooms in the cube contain tables and chairs, seating arrangements change by rearranging storage boxes. (The boxes are also a reminder of the root of the family's success, the store in Alabama.) Move the boxes and you have the interior of a coach. Move them again, and the father, on the taller stack, sits with his son and the son plays with his invisible beard. The concept is not new but on this scale – a trilogy in the Armory – it is daring and exciting. The audience is tapped as an important aspect of this creative process.



Photo by Caroline Shadle.

The trilogy consists of "Three Brothers," "Fathers & Sons," and "The Immortal" (about the company). "Three Brothers" is a paean to the immigrant experience and the American dream. Its format is story theatre: much direct address to the audience. It begins with a dream of "the magic music box called America" -- the dream of Henry Lehman, son of a cattle merchant in Rimpar, Bavaria. The 45-day passage is transformative. The teetotalling boy becomes an expert drinker, who can distinguish not just various liquors but the quality of his drink. The boy who never gambled arrives adept at dice and cards. And so, open to change, he embraces the multiplicity of New York, but moves to Montgomery, Alabama, to open his shop. He hand paints his own shop sign. The sign is continually repainted by the brothers as the business grows. "A can of paint on the sidewalk" is one of several refrains, which evokes family history with a light, almost self-deprecating comic touch.

Once his two brothers arrive, the action speeds up. The fraternal battles are lively as the Lehmans change direction and struggle with a steep learning curve. Idea begets idea. Henry ("who is always right") decides to add seed and farm tools to the inventory. Emanuel balks, so the brothers canvass the farmers to learn if there is a need. They begin to accept raw cotton as payment, but selling the cotton yields a small profit. (Yes, during slavery. They were not social pioneers.) After a visit to a New York cotton exchange, they learn how to make the transport of cotton profitable and they create a new profession – middlemen.

They are businessmen and their courtships are based on that paradigm. Emanuel marries a Southern belle -- for love. He is so infatuated that he makes bookkeeping errors. Wed to the



Photo by Caroline Shadle.

business, Mayer, the youngest brother, decides which alliance would make him happy and presents himself. Unlike his older brother, he does not court her, not in the traditional sense. He appears at her door and proposes 24 times and finalizes the wedding date with her father. Phillip, Emanuel's son, draws up a list of eligible women, assesses their strengths, then proposes.

The trilogy is filled with comical and quirky touches, all intrinsic to the characters. Herbert Lehman, who is upset because his sisters are not treated as equal to his brothers, is discovered to be a poor fit for the business. He becomes the 45 Governor of New York (1933 -1942) and a US Senator (1949 – 1957). Philip Lehman, who runs the company as it transitions from a commodities house to a house of issue, feels in constant competition with his more famous brother. A tightrope walker on Wall Street becomes a metaphor for the high-risk trading world. Words (like "shares") have replaced objects (like tons of cotton) in their business dealings. The story of Noah and the ark becomes a cautionary tale for running the company, even as they market the self-serving slogan that buying is winning.

The play ends where it began, with the three brothers, the small shop in Montgomery, and the dream. Toward the end, the trilogy takes on a moral tone. The family has lost its values. In the end, the company is controlled by strangers. Henry, the eldest brother, closed the dry-goods shop on Shabbat (Saturday) but opened it on Sunday. When Henry died, the brothers observed the Jewish traditions of mourning; they sat shiva for seven days and tore their suits. In the next generation, they mourned a death for three days. And in the third generation, three minutes. The first and second generations married for life. Bobbie Lehman, the third generation, was divorced twice. The immigrant saga becomes the contemporary American story.

"The Lehman Trilogy" covers 150 years of western capitalism. It was written by Stefano Massini and first performed in Paris in 2013. The 2015 staging by Luca Ronconi in Milan captured international attention and has enjoyed multiple stagings throughout Europe. The English version has been adapted by Ben Power, Deputy Artistic Director of the National Theatre, where this version of the play premiered.