

NYC 2014 - Theater

Mon Jan 13	Public - Helen and Edgar - Edgar Oliver
Tues Jan 14	Sarah Glass Menagerie
Wed Jan 15	Matinee - Half Price - Waiting for Godot
	Public - Rodney King 7:30
Thurs Jan 16	Big Mouth Breakfast With Mugabe
Fri Jan 17	XX
Sat Jan 18	aft - Gentleman's Guide
	Eve. - St Anne's Warehouse - Kate Tempest, Brand New Ancients
Sun Jan 19	Bedlam's St Joan
Mon Jan 20	Mercy Killers
Tues Jan 21	Twelfth Night
Wed Jan 22	MAT - Machinal
	EVEN - XX

Glass Menagerie -Tuesday evening

This great revival has been on all the 10 Best lists. I have a few problems with the production but the overall effect was first rate. And the story of striving / failing mother resonates.

All the actors were struggling with their southern accents and often I could not understand the words they were saying, the words but never the emotions. The set was terrific. The gimmick of the sister emerging from the sofa was appropriate. There were a couple of sequences of near dance by the actors that were effective, especially Tom miming wounds from his mother's words. I was puzzled that there was no 40's swing music, given Laura listened to it all the time and it played across the alleyway. And no collection of glass animals - just one. It came off like a stylized - modern - version of the old play. It worked.

There were lots of laughs. I wonder if 50 years ago it would have seemed funny.

The casting was interesting. The gentleman caller was a hunky your actor named Brain Smith who was such a 'winner' it was hard to believe he was working in a warehouse. The text says he is somewhat homely. Not even close. This casting gives the second act some sexual juice which was good to watch. It doesn't change the tragedy - probably heightens it. Perhaps a problem is that you know right from the start he just being nice to her, maybe hitting on her.

The device of a narrator - Tom - seems ok. But his expressions of guilt at the end seemed superfluous. All those emotions were in the story. The tragedy was not his desertion and guilt, it was mother and her wreckage.

The actor playing Tom has had raves. I can't say he was better than the mother who has the best role.

Altogether the play deserves its reputation for greatness. The family tragedy is well worked out. The marred speaking prevented it from being gripping and moving.

#### *Waiting for Godot / McKellen and Stewart*

This hot ticket turned up at the half price wicket for the Wednesday matinee. I couldn't resist. The companion show *No Man's Land* was on my short list buy not at full price and it was reported that it never came up at half price. So I bought *Waiting* as a next best substitute.

If I had ever seen this in full production I don't remember.

Both McKellen and Stewart were terrific at all aspects for clowning, maybe I should say hamming, Patrick Stewart if anything better but then he had the better part. They milked the script and situation for laughs and the audience loved it. I admit I was well amused. I was happy for Patrick Stewart, that he can 'act' (i.e. 'ham') and is more than a wooden Spock. These are old men whose shoes don't fit and who have to pee a lot and who get beaten when they sleep under bridges. They talk about separating but hang together as a couple. They cuddle a few times and the audience 'aw's as if they were cute puppies.

Pozzo and Lucky were wildly funny and distracting. In the text Lucky is lucky because he has a purpose and a master ... even if it is an utterly abusive situation. And thus, by comparison, Vladimir and Estragon are 'free'.

Lucky raced through his famous rant like dragster. You could hardly understand a word. Another modern director destroying text with an impressive and utterly incomprehensible speed read. The audience cheered, I assume because they were relieved of any implication they should listen or try to understand. I'd rather they cut it than butcher it.

The question is whether they clowned so effectively that existential angst of the *waiting for* ... who ... something ... was completely lost. Was it just two funny guys hanging out ... at the improv club ... and kibitzing? There was a serious moment at the very end when McKellen closes the play with solemn little speech about waiting, despair and boredom. The impact? Gee, ... the director should have cut that. Kinda ruins the mood

Altogether ... an uproarious funny, touching and warm-hearted peek into day-to-day lives of an aging gay couple fully enjoying their last days.

\*\*

*Rodney King* - Performance ... Roger Gouverneur Smith  
*Big Mouth* - Performance SKaGeN ... Valentijn Dhaenens

These were both terrific 'monologues' but so far from Spaulding Grey sitting at a table yacking! So very far! Both had carefully prepped sound tracks as an essential part of the show. Both had content and were about 'political' subject matter. Two, two, remarkable things for modern theatre. Both were fabulous to watch. Roger Smith moves like a dancer as he speaks. Dhaenens does a dozen voices in four languages using nine mikes. (also sur-title translations)

Short of being in the street you couldn't ask more political content of Roger Smith. *Rodney King*'s story was told with warts, many, many, but still with respect. I learned a lot, some unflattering, which is part of the power of the piece. The finale is a brief and very fumbling speech by RK about getting along. Smith calls his piece a prayer. He had his hyper-literate NYC audience by the balls.

*Big Mouth* is technically much more difficult, mixing sound track, performance, song, etc. It is more difficult to decipher. Dhaenens has bits from nineteen orators, some very short and mixed up but mostly they are powerful illustrations of the art and performs them, whether his imitation is good, who knows, but they are powerful. (How DID Socrates sound in his good-bye speech?) There is a mix of left and right and by no means does he include all the most famous bit of rhetoric. There are many puzzles. Some bits are garbled and some are fumbling, bumbling at the microphone - e.g. George Bush. Most powerful was the dueling speeches of Goebbels summoning his people, quietly, intensely, to the final battle, juxtaposed to General Paton bloodthirsty call to his American killers.

\*\*

### Breakfast With Mugabe

I like a serious political play. This one was trying. And lead actor as the malevolent dictator was pretty good. The premise was potentially interesting - the evil dictator hires a psychiatrist to deal with the ghost who seems to haunt him. The shrink just happens to be a white liberal with black nurse wife and a beautiful farm. Mugabe

has an evil young, beautiful, corrupt wife. The ghost is of an old ally – or enemy – of Mugabe. After that I couldn't follow. The shrink says or does something to free or rid Mugabe of the ghost.

Something about his first wife. Then the shrink's wife is murdered by farm invaders. Was this revenge for something. Or the result of letting the ghost rest? The play has been a success for seven or eight years in UK and NYC. There must be a clear meaning in there. I am so stupid. Or, to be generous, everybody else in the room had considerable expertise in Zim politics. Anyhow, the evil dictator carried the show as a ranting paranoid. On stage that seems to be all that counts. Who cares what the play means – or whether the meaning is coherent of if it means anything other than black guy dictators are fun to hate. Right?

\*\*

#### *Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*

The show has been on every ten best list. Mary Rowe wanted to see it. It was tons of fun. The music was old-fashioned Broadway comic, well performed. Perhaps not so good as *Urinetown* but right up there. Terrific performers. The story was tightly organized. I could only spot two places where it was less than perfect for the farce it was and neither mattered. Jefferson Mays play eight members of the D'Ysquith family murdered in succession. A *tour de force*. But the greatest charm of the show was the succession of comic sets and backdrops, a genius farce setting the bar at a new high for 'fun to watch'. I would expect this show to have a long life.

#### *Brand New Ancients*

Kate Tempest is and East End London rap poet performer of a strong and charming populous bent. She looks fifteen. She's won the Ted Hughes prize for poetry. Her story – and it was a fully worked out story – concerned down and out folk who she lionized for the courage and pities for their failures. Most important, they are 'gods', as worthy of grand triumph and tragedy as the ancients. They are the *Brand New Ancients*. She writes with love and affection. She denounces the glossy gods of the tabloids. Her verse rhymes and alliterates frequently. It is – god forbid – accessible. I doubt she needed the band that backed her up but they were more music setting than anything. Ms Tempest never 'sang'. I've heard the recordings of Gindberg doing *Howl* and Gil Scott-Heron doing *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. This great performance piece belongs in that realm.

Mary Rowe and I could not get into Marie Crisis – a line up. We ended up in a nearby basement Jazz Club which fulfilled in every way one image of such places. Except ... nobody was smoking!

The quartet was skilled but had the volume cranked up too loud. Three or four of their pieces were fab. The rest so-so.

\*\*

The take away message from all these great monologues is the high standard of performance/entertainment. Spaulding Grey sitting at a table, yakking, doesn't cut it.

*Mercy Killers* - Michael Milligan - Clurman Productions - The Working Theater

e-mail to Mary Rowe

I've never known you to make a mistake - except the one you made this evening - by passing on Michael Milligan in *Mercy Killers*. At last a show that will never make it to Broadway. Too much serious kick. The best political theater I can remember since the early days of *Passe Muraille*. And yes, darling, it's true, even better than *Kate Tempest*.

Go this week or next while you still have time.

The question for you is this - is it too histrionic for Canada?

CMC

p.s. to Max - Milligan teaches at Stella Adler. I made a joke that I expected somebody channeling Marlon B doing Stanley K. when Stella gets cancer. Marlon couldn't do half the job. And Milligan wrote the piece as well.

2<sup>nd</sup> e-mail

1/21/14 8:33:45 AM

Here's an alternate plan. Feb 2 - 9 it is being produced at the Bronx Borough Office of the United Federation of Teachers. And Feb 11 to 16 at the Electrical Industry Center Auditorium of Local 3 IBEW. I'd love to hear whether in these venues it reaches a 'working class audience' and then ... the real question ... whether it touches such an audience.

The performance is over the moon and the audience I was with ... of Manhattan theater types ... everybody kissed three people ... loved it. I'll bet half were acting students and their mothers.

The joint producers, The Working Theater and Harold Clurman Productions are making a serious effort to take the play to the people it is written to and for. Which is not the rich of Manhattan. Does this audience exist? Will it respond? I'd never heard of the Working Theater. It is union-sponsored. Clurman is the producing arm of Stella Adler with a modest but serious playbill. I thought such left-ish theatrical impulses had been rung out.

It was interesting that the audience laughed during the performance many times when I thought it was inappropriate. (not always, there is humor there) But sometimes AT the working Joe and his clumsy speech. How will a different audience respond?

Once this gets reviewed ... and it is bound to happen ... this production will be overrun by ladies in black dresses and their arm candy. But maybe they won't go to the Electrical Industry Center Auditorium. Another interesting question. Maybe the arm candy will appear in jeans on their night off? What I want to know is whether this

has legs outside the self-regarding theater world of Manhattan.  
I'm thinking of becoming a promoter - how hard can it be ? - and bringing this show to Toronto. I spoke to the Production manager of Clurman about this last night. I need another set of eyes. You. The problem is that we don't need the political message about health care and might turn snobby. The real reason to do the import is to demonstrate to our demure and wooden thesbians how to act and write. But to say this would be the kiss of death.

CMC

\*\*

1/21/14 10:27:48 PM

*Twelfth Night*

Impressive and delightful to see the staging and especially the original music. The oral abilities were uniformly excellent – speeches were not rushed except for Sir Toby – the Foo l's puns were thick and fast as in the text – a reminder WS had a very quick tongue –

I dislike the play for its sympathy for the drunkards –

The cross-dressing of the actors would not have been a source of humor in 1600 – in this production this was played up and played for laughs and the audience loved it –

- the cross-dressing n the play itself is a stupid plot – WS disapproves and has to undo it all and let male and female marry properly –

\*\*

1/22/14 4:17:28 PM

*Machinel*

Here is a play from the 20s by Sophie Treadwell, a go-getter reporter from the era who also wrote for the stage. The bio material is impressive.

The play is about a murderer of the era, who did in her husband. I have no idea how accurate the play is to the facts. What it does is attempt to portray a woman never happy, nagged and fearful of sex who marries the boss who is ... bossy. She meets a sexy drifter, has sweet love and then kills hubby. She denies it at trial but then the drifter seems to rat her out by affidavit evidence from Mexico. (It doesn't ring true on stage why he does this.) She confesses and is electrocuted in the last scene.

The staging is elaborate, with many scenes on a revolving scene in quick succession. This managed to push a fairly complicated story along quickly and well. The style is harsh and mechanistic, attempting to shift the blame somehow to the cruel world. It is an impressive effort at staging but not that persuasive to me in the moralizing. She was border-line personality right form the start.

I'd have to read the text to see whether this elaboration is there in the original – if that matters.

This was an effort that was interesting to watch but left me cold. It was the only show of this entire visit that has not got a standing ovation.

\*\*

1/21/14 8:54:13 AM

Solo shows I haven't seen

*Ruff* - before and after stroke victim

*Grounded* about female Air Force pilot downed by pregnancy who reconciles herself to operating drone strikes

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/18/theater/grounded-a-fighter-pilots-story.html>

New York - May 2015

The first play was *Airline Highway* by Lisa d'Amour. Done at Manhattan Theatre Club. A play created at Steppenwolf in Chicago. The writer did a play called *Detroit*, which I saw in Washington and which also done at Playwrights Horizon.

The story was thin. A funeral party held for a dying strip club operator, Rose, at her New Orleans motel residence, by her low life but loving 'family' who lived there with her. One of her pets, Bait Boy, who hosted her karaoke, returns after an absence of four years. He'd been picked up by a cougar and made a new upscale life for himself. His return is a problem for an old girlfriend. Not much happens in term of linear plot but lots of pain, regret, love and artificial family. Called a 'kaleidoscope'. A lot of overtalking and chaotic partying. Characters take turns telling their stories. Quite a few are sex workers. They are all 'troubled' etc. Like *Detroit* there is good class awareness about the underclass.

The structure was the same as *Detroit*, in the sense the plot was half-ass, ending in a wild crazy party chaos on stage. This worked better in that the party was for a good cause, the funeral party before the deceased departed. The frail old dying stripper – with the heart of gold 'for her people' gives them her good-bye blessing and final advice. That was surreal.

I liked the premise. I liked watching. I liked the main characters. They were 'bad' sorts, but tragic and courageous in their way. In *Detroit* I didn't like the crazies. Liked, but not deeply moved. I was ready at the end to be deeply moved when the 'big momma' is finally brought down on her stretcher. But her final speech fell flat. Surreal only. I liked the embrace of commercial sex as 'what we do'. The portrait of them as 'all fucked up' was overdone. I know a couple reasonably well. They're fallen in the sense that they're in the work mostly because other jobs and situations didn't workout, e.g. very smart immigrants who can't get the work they're capable of. Another was A.D.D. and couldn't get work. The better sorts were smart about the work and client relations, good at sex and sensitive about it. The lesser sorts were conceited and insensitive and not too happy but not all fucked up as in the play. The evening before I supper with an escort type who told me he was, he thought, the longest serving male escort in town and just won The Hookie for 'Best Daddy'. He was A.D.D. so limited in office type employment but happy and proud of, and apparently sensitive about, his sexual services.

I'll bet it would be better in a garage theatre – less beautifully produced. The fancy Broadway production risked being patronizing. It was so raw that mostly it survived that.

I don't think it was mike-ed. At time it was hard to make out what the actors were saying.

Overall – good effort and interesting to watch.

I was drawn to the play partly because I had a similar idea for a play. The guy announces to the world he's dead and stages his own funeral – to hear what his 'friends' will say about him and wires the room to eavesdrop of their private conversations about him. He has purportedly recorded his own remarks for play back – i.e to deliver his own eulogy. Which he rewrites in light of his eavesdropping. Power sorts, not down and outs. Still a good idea.

\*\*

Wednesday evening I saw *Clinton, the Musical*. The good Bill and the bad Bill are played by different actors. Hillary is an impish belter. She listens to the wise words of Eleanor Roosevelt who appears behind the scrim of her portrait and delivers her famous homilies. (They named a rose after me – it's not very good in a bed but great up against a wall.) Very funny. The press are roasted.

Historically it is close to the facts about Linda Trip, the cross-examination, the lies, etc. Doesn't cover Hill as Senator or Sec/State.

Basically it's sympathetic to the Clintons. Monica and Ken Starr get roasted. Bill is just a guy with a weakness - which is bad – but he struggles with it. The Republicans are bad, bad. Newt is a clown – with Bill's problem. Hillary is betrayed, suffers and takes Eleanor's advise – as a President's wife twice betrayed – stay with him for the good of the country. Which Hillary takes to mean she should be President. (Eleanor is ... 'that's not what I meant!') It is politically astute. It packages the scandal as a private weakness exploited by Ken Starr and Newt. The stage is hung with portraits of other Presidents and their mistresses. The scandal is so 'over' – if it can become a musical comedy!

It is sassy, polished, ribald, quick, smart, very, very funny. (Monica's big song is "I'm fucking the fucking President.") At the end the audience stands and cheers for Hillary. Very New York.

\*\*

Thursday was *Hand to God*. This play by Robert Askins was both extremely funny with rude hand puppets and an intense personal story of a fucked up teen struggling with a dead dad and a promiscuous mom. Mom teaches hand puppets at church and Jason's extremely clever hand puppet turns out to be the devil, who possesses him, fans his family resentments and teaches him to do bad things. The actor, Steven Boyer, did a brilliant job in two voices, the shy youth and the naughty/bad/evil puppet arguing with each other. An excellent blend of audience pleasing comedy/slapstick and a darker meaning, which it illustrated. At the very end it gets very serious – and troubling – but the balance is perfect – for commercial theatre. I was extremely impressed. It's my view of great theatre for this age – laugh. Laugh. Laugh – while the serious meaning and moral sneaks up and takes over.

\*\*

Friday I saw *An American in Paris*. This is an excellent cut and paste collection of Gershwin songs and concert pieces woven into a story of true love in postwar Paris. It is mostly a dance piece to the Gershwin music - some pure Broadway and some pure ballet. They can indeed dance! But the highlight of the show to me was the backdrops which evolved and changed beautifully - impressionistic Paris street scenes - abstract constructivist backdrops for the dance and ballet scenes. Of two hours here were only maybe 20 minutes that were not fantastic to watch. The music is great for the pure ballet ('An American in Paris') and suitably Broadway for the rest, mostly very familiar Gershwin. The dancers could sing!  
I loved *On The Town* when I saw it in January. Better music. Good dancing. But the sets could not compare.

\*\*