

**THEATER**

Only two new musicals can be termed hits. *Aida* is Disney's answer to the enormous Broadway-West End success of *The Lion King*, a show I found unwatchable after the first 10 minutes. For its new blockbuster Disney has hired the tired pop-music dynamic duo of Elton John and Tim Rice to do a rockin' version of Giuseppe Verdi's kitschy operatic masterpiece. The idea is pretty lamebrained, but the results are entertaining—if certifiably idiotic.

The reasons *Aida* works have less to do with its writers than its interpreters, as the book and lyrics are utterly forgettable, and Sir John's score seems like a series of songs left over from his last five or six albums. In typical Elton fashion, they combine infectiously catchy vamps and hooks strung together without much subtlety. While certainly no one was expecting anything remotely resembling Verdian artistry, it would be nice if the score reflected the action onstage with a bit more invention than simply veering into a minor key when things start getting a little heavy.

Undeniably, the score does provide the show's talented cast plenty of chances to strut their stuff. While leading man Adam Pascal does little more than a passable Joe Cocker imitation, and his acting is nonexistent—his frequently exposed pectoral muscles show far more emotion than he does—the show's two leading ladies are a force to be reckoned with.

Sheri Rene Scott as the Pharaoh's daughter goes from Tori Spelling to soulful diva and manages the transition with style, wit and a truly fabulous voice. Equally fabulous is leading lady and Tony recipient Heather Headley, who is a true star-in-the-making in the title role. Headley's stunning performance is a torrent of emotion, her powerful voice tearing out of her contorting body with visceral abandon.

This year's Tony-winning new musical is Susan Stroman and John Weidman's *Contact*, which is not really a musical at all, but a lame trio of modern dance pieces, which is only inventive if you haven't been to a dance concert or ballet in the last 15 years. I'm a huge fan of Stroman's inventive, innovative and truly inspired work on other shows, but I have to admit *Contact* is the first disappointing piece I have seen from her.

Set to a mishmash of hackneyed, prerecorded musical choices, the show gives us three light-as-air vignettes that are connected by the flimsiest of threads: people attempting to make contact—wow! what a concept! And, what is worse, Stroman's usually exciting work seems repetitive and emotionally arid here.

The cast, with one exception, doesn't really help matters much. Boyd Gaines is lightweight and only has one note in his Tony-winning turn, and Deborah Yates certainly has an unforgettable iconic presence in that much-discussed yellow dress, but she hasn't really much to do.

It is left to the show's other Tony winner, the multitalented trouper Karen Ziemba, to make the evening memorable. Her exquisite portrayal of a goon's repressed wife who finds a surprising, passionate release through dance is both liberating and heartbreaking.

It is left to a pair of musical revivals to provide the current season's most delicious high points.

Stroman's fantastic reimagining of *The Music Man* proves why she is such a genius (and why *Contact* is such a letdown.) In her hands, this gorgeously designed and wonderfully cast revival dances across the stage with delirious joy. As she has shown with her work in *Crazy for You*, *Showboat* and last season's *Oklahoma!* in London (coming to Broadway this fall), Stroman is a master at creating dance naturally out of thin air.

The cast of this sparkling revival is consistently wonderful, but there is especially fine work from the lovely Rebecca Luker as the perfect Marian the Librarian, Ruth Williamson in a high-camp tour de force as the Mayor's Wife, and from a superb barbershop quartet.

The production's Harold Hill is an oddity. Craig Bierko seems to have all the elements needed for a dashing leading man—great voice, great looks, great moves—but for some reason he seems to be channeling the role's originator, Robert Preston, in a performance that's more impersonation than interpretation. It's a shame, but it certainly doesn't lessen the impact of this wonderful evening.

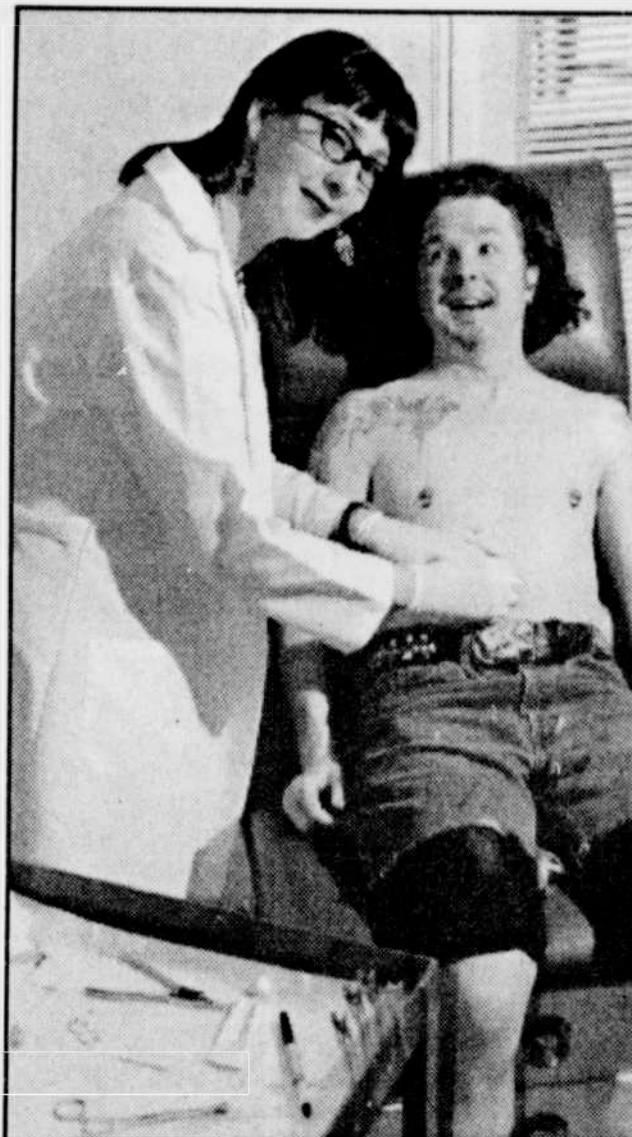
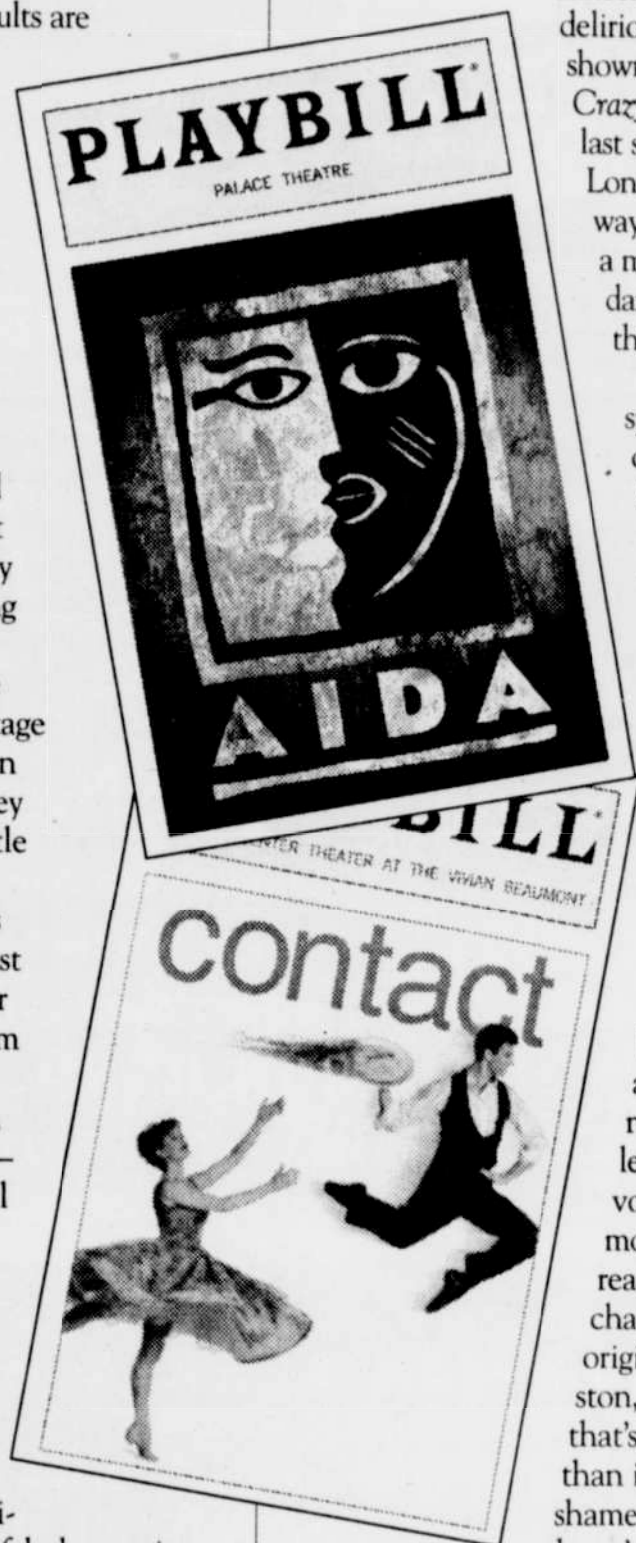
Equally enjoyable is the current revival of Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate*, another perfect example of musical theater. Director Michael Blakemore and choreographer Kathleen Marshall, along with a marvelous design team, give a polished shine to an old chestnut.

Bristling with energy, the cast tears into the show as though it were written yesterday. Led by the magnetic and vastly talented Brian Stokes Mitchell, Amy Spanger and Michael Berresse, the sheer panache of this cast lights up the stage.

Watching the audiences at both *Kiss Me Kate* and *Music Man* respond with such unadulterated, childlike ecstasy was a beautiful example of the transformative joy of live theater. (Stroman's utterly shameless but totally inspired curtain call for *Music Man* would bring out the inner child in the most hardhearted theatergoer.)

Finally, for an example of the glory of dance, head north to Lincoln Center, where you can't do too much better than the justly renowned *New York City Ballet*. Though the company is not quite what it was during the glory days of the Balanchine regime, it's still a wonderful company capable of greatness. The mixed-bill evening I caught showed off the company with bravado and was capped by a luminous account of one of Balanchine's most entertaining and beautiful works, the rapturous *Vienna Waltzes*.

■ JON KRETZU is the artistic director of Artists Repertory Theatre in Portland. He is spending the summer renewing his creative juices and directing a play in California.



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