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Marina Del Rey
La Femme Magnifique International 2003/2004
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WILLAMETTE WEEK

THEATER

Broadway schmoadway

Gay puppets save New York season
from complete disaster

BY JON KRETZU



A closeted Republican puppet argues with his roommate in the Broadway smash *Avenue Q*

Theater, and Broadway in particular, is often referred to as The Fabulous Invalid. Well, if the 2004 New York City season is anything to go by, the invalid is on life support and hanging on by a thread.

On my recent annual pilgrimage I found the only new musical worth traveling cross country to see is the delightful *Avenue Q*, which deserved every bit of recognition it got at this year's Tony Awards (Best Musical, Best Score, Best Book).

Don't let the faux-Muppets put you off—this fur and felt *thirtysomething* is funny, touching and outrageous fun. Any show that includes gay puppets, full puppet nudity and catchy Broadway showstoppers about racism, *schadenfreude* and Gary Coleman is tops with me.

Equally original is the spectacle of Hugh Jackman single-handedly making *The Boy from Oz* into a smash hit. This musical biography of gay cabaret icon Peter Allen is a hopeless muddle—all of Allen's songs are clumsily shoehorned into an often ridiculous book that reduces a sub-interesting life into a series of "And then I wrote/And then I fucked" clichés.

Still, there are compensations: Isabel Keating's weird channeling of Judy Garland, Stephanie J. Block's impersonation of Lucie Arnaz playing Liza Minnelli. Then there is Mr. Jackman. I am convinced that the dull and wooden actor that turns up on screen is the real deal's talentless twin brother. On stage Jackman comes to life with megawatt charisma. You have never seen someone work an audience like he does—and without a shred of effort.

This year's Emperor's New Clothes Award most deservedly goes to the hideous *Wicked*. This green elephant of a show takes Gregory Maguire's intriguing novel (a satiric prequel to *The Wizard Of Oz* subtitled *The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*) and turns it into a lumbering, noisy tank of a musical. Winnie Holzman's script has the graceful wit of a two-ton truck, and the less said about Stephen Schwartz's relentlessly

dull score (which would be subpar even for a subpar composer like Schwartz) the better.

Granted, I did not see the renowned, Tony-winning Idina Menzel (of the freakishly high voice) but her understudy, who seemed to be doing a fine Menzel imitation. Somehow I don't think it would have made much difference who was wearing the green makeup—this show stinks.

The only other new musical of note is *Caroline, or Change*, one of those shows that carries its pedigree (book and lyrics by Tony Kushner, music by Jeanine Tesori, direction by George C. Wolfe) like a shield before it. *Caroline* is a show one desperately wants to love. It is intelligent, socially responsible, passionately performed. And yet...if

only it wasn't so in love with its own importance. There's no getting round the fact it is opaque in its passions, often pompous in its socialism and, finally, a bit of a bore.

Kushner's libretto is meant to be a subtle parable about race relations and societal tensions in 1963 Louisiana, but its poetry is leaden, its impact vague and its metaphors deep on the surface. Tesori's music is forever striving for guts and glory but settles for volume, and Wolfe's direction never soars.

The cast, however, throws itself into the work with great dedication; Tonya Pinkins' Caroline is undeniably a powerhouse performance. Still, you come out feeling like you have to go home and write a book report.

The truly odd musical work on Broadway this season comes in the form of its three hit revivals.

Leonard Bernstein and Comden & Green's 1950s romp *Wonderful Town* is a quirky soufflé blessed with a fabulous score. Kathleen Marshall's revival, though, flattens the show into a limp sitcom. It's easy to dismiss the vanilla supporting cast, but it is impossible to miss Donna Murphy's diva turn in the leading role, for which she has garnered rhapsodic critical attention. But after a while all her cute, squinty-eyed grandstanding and vocal/facial mugging just made me want to shoot her.

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