



Hank Azaria (right, with Christian Borle) is initiated into gay life as a butchly swish Lancelot in *Spamalot*.

butchly swish Lancelot and, in a class of her own, Sara Ramirez's crackerjack timing and jaw-dropping voice in her justifiably Tony-winning turn as the Lady (or should we say Diva) of the Lake. By the time we reached the sing-along bows and the confetti cannons, the audience had reached a unique state of musical comedy delirium—how wonderful to see such happiness in a theater.

Brief mention should also be made of the London import *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, not because of its saccharine score and simplistic kiddie antics, but because of the show's two star performances: that stylish, gleaming and smoothly operating flying car and the hilarious comic depravity of Jan Maxwell's Marlene Dietrich-on-crack Baroness.

On the Broadway musical revival scene, the bizarre David Leveaux staging of *Fiddler on the Roof* is still playing, and while it remains a deconstructivist nightmare of a production, it has gained some well-needed chutzpah with its new stars—Harvey Fierstein and Rosie O'Donnell. Fierstein chews every piece of scenery available and manages to be both grotesque and lovable, often simultaneously, while O'Donnell makes a touching, funny and utterly believable Goldie. There was also the undeniable heartwarming charge to be had from seeing these two gay icons playing husband and wife in one of the most family-oriented musical comedies of all time.

Finally, off-Broadway played host to two recent new musical hits whose charms totally escaped me. The Christian boy band show *Alar Boyz* was a one-joke premise stretched to communion-wafer thinness. Despite the earnest, occasionally funny gyrations of an energetically cute cast, after a few minutes the requisite NSYNC power moves choreography, bubblelicious pop songs and tired jokes wear out their welcome.

The less said about *The Musical of Musicals* the better. This somehow hit show was possibly one of the worst things I've ever seen in New York. Performed by a relentlessly untalented cast, this witless set of parodies of famous Broadway composers (Rodgers and Hammerstein, Sondheim, Jerry Herman, etc. etc.) looked and sounded like the work of gay junior high musical comedy queens in training.

In the realm of straight plays, things weren't much better. A mostly dull, loud revival of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* starring a low-voltage Kathleen Turner was somewhat brightened by the quirky, odd-ball histrionics of co-star Bill Irwin. A hideous revival of *The Glass Menagerie*, another American masterpiece destroyed by David Leveaux (can't someone take away his work visa?), featured the wonderful Jessica Lange giving a stunning account of Blanche DuBois, unfortunately while playing Amanda Wingfield, along with the unwatchable Christian Slater.

The most disappointing of the new plays was Terrence McNally's hopeless muddle of a script, *Dedication* or *The Stuff of Dreams*. McNally has given us many wonderful plays,

but this isn't one of them. An amalgamation of overbaked histrionics, tedious exposition and limp wit, *Dedication* would be utterly forgettable if it wasn't for the incandescent tour de force of theatrical grande dame Marion Seldes, who kept this excuse for a play alive through sheer guts and crystalline technique as an acidic Queen Bitch.

There were also two so-so productions of cool new scripts. Martin McDonagh's London hit *The Pillowman* was a disturbing, blackly funny sick joke of a play,

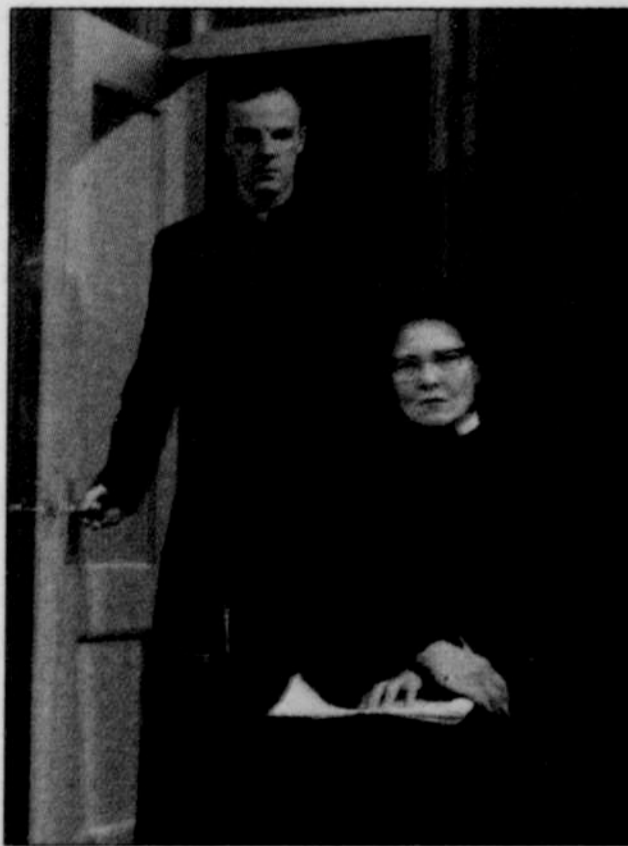
and it got a fine staging here that was lacking in a true sense of dread—mostly because of the cast's earnest yet somehow safe performances. Austin Pendleton's Orson's *Shadow*—an affectionate and poignant comedy about theatrical legends Orson Welles, Laurence Olivier, Kenneth Tynan and Vivien Leigh—got a prosaic staging in its off-Broadway premiere, lacking the theatricality and complexity the script demands, despite the fine work of some of its cast.

Thankfully, there was John Patrick Shanley's Tony- and Pulitzer-winning *Doubt* to make up for all this half-baked drama on this season's stages. Here was a masterful script dealing with powerful issues (a church abuse scandal that may or may not have happened) in highly creative, thought-provoking ways. Beautifully directed by Doug Hughes and featuring a peerless quartet of great actors, the emotional roller coaster of *Doubt* was almost reason enough to make the trip to New York this year.

Two other events made the trip worthwhile this season. For 23 years, Gerald Alessandri has been skewering the Great White Way in his viciously funny revue, *Forbidden Broadway*.

This season's version was as merciless as ever and a hysterical pleasure. And over at the intimate Café Carlyle, Broadway legend Elaine Stritch proved, at the age of 80, to be as funny, inspiring and devastating as ever in a new 90-minute one-woman cabaret follow-up to her already legendary one-woman show *At Liberty*. Watching Stritch work a room with her sly, martini-dry wit and dig into a set of powerful songs with gut-wrenching power is to bear witness to why we keep going to the theater in first place. **J**

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Brian F. O'Byrne and Cherry Jones cast *Doubt* on a church abuse scandal that may or may not have happened.



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