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Quirky Musicals Off-B'way and On: *Scotland, Shop, Forbidden, Percy Jackson*

David Sheward · Thursday, October 24th, 2019

A trio of quirky tuners have just opened Off-Broadway while a small family show transfers from Off to on. Both *Scotland, PA* at Roundabout's Laura Pels and *Little Shop of Horrors* in a commercial run at the Westside Theater, translate weird, dark little movies into weird dark little musicals. The former is derived from William Morrisette's 2001 macabre comedy setting Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in a fast-food joint in 1975 dead-end Central Pennsylvania. *Little Shop* (1982) took Roger Corman's 1960 Grade-Z horror schlocker about a monstrous plant for its inspiration, went on to run five years Off-Broadway, launched a 1986 film remake, a 2003 Broadway revival, and numerous tours and amateur productions. Both shows feature frighteningly fun, gruesome murders and spoofy scores, ribbing the music of their respective eras. *Little Shop* is still a rollicking, guilty-pleasure good time, while the sometimes witty and fiendishly funny *Scotland* has its slow spots.



Kaleb Wells, Wonu Ogunfowora, Alysha Umphress, and Ryan McCartan in *Scotland, PA*.

Credit: Nina Goodheart

Michael Mitnick's *Scotland* book, based on Morrisette's screenplay, gleefully skewers the narrowness of small-town life and the shallowness of consumer culture in Shakespearean terms. But the parallels to the Bard's plot feel at bit strained and repetitive at times and the show comes across as an overextended *SNL* sketch. Adam Gwon's score joyfully parodies the cheesy polyester tunes of the '70s and Lonny Price's staging attempts to balance broadness with just the right degree of verisimilitude. But the show doesn't seem to quite know what it wants to be—a flat-out comedy, a pithy satire on corporate greed, or a heartfelt tragedy on the cruelty of fate.



Jay Armstrong Johnson in *Scotland, PA*.

Credit: Nina Goodheart

The confusion stymies the leads with Ryan McCartan's Mac and Taylor Iman Jones' Pat (Lady MacB) caught in middle between spoof and Shakespeare. Like the rest of the cast including Will Meyers' conflicted, closeted Malcolm, Megan Lawrence's detective version of MacDuff, and Jeb Brown's nasty Duncan, they sport powerful vocals and admirable acting chops, but the focus isn't clear. Only Jay Armstrong Johnson as the goofy Banko (instead of Banquo, get it?) achieves the right blend of nuttiness and pathos. In a delightfully underplayed stoner voice, Johnson nails this slacker oddball, especially in his riotous solo number, "Kick-Ass Party" in which he details the

ideal soiree for a lonely guy with weird taste and too much time on his hands.



Jonathan Groff and Christian Borle in *Little Shop of Horrors*.

Credit: Emilio Madrid-Kuser

While *Scotland* is a mixed bag of styles, *Little Shop* unabashedly celebrates the original film's guilty-pleasure sleaziness. Featuring a sterling pop-rock-doo-wop score by Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, the new revival directed with ghoulish glee by Michael Mayer retains this little gem's whacky charm. The 2003 revival was somewhat lost in the large Virginia Theater (now the August Wilson), but this production fits snugly in the intimate Westside Theater as does Nicholas Mahon's monstrous puppet design of Audrey II, the carnivorous plant. Julian Crouch's spooky set evokes *Sweeney Todd* and low-grade horror pix.



Jonathan Groff in *Little Shop of Horrors*.

Credit: Emilio Madrid-Kuser

Jonathan Groff is appropriately sweet, nerdy and secretly sinister as Seymour, the clerk who feeds human blood to the ever-growing Audrey II. Tammy Blanchard's pathetic Audrey, the shopgirl Seymour pines for, is bit too close to her Hedy LaRue from the 2011 *How to Succeed*—a tough gal who can take care of herself. Audrey needs to be a fragile victim for the show to work. Despite this incongruity, Blanchard and Groff have some magic moments together, particularly during the iconic "Suddenly Seymour" duet. The versatile Christian Borle nearly steals the shows in a variety of roles including Orin, Audrey's sadistic dentist boyfriend who is addicted to laughing gas. Watch as Borle takes hit after hit of the goofy stuff and barely contains the rush. He even manages to shine in tiny cameos such as an over-enthusiastic customer and a female publishing executive. Tom Alan Robbins brings heft to Mushnik, the beleaguered florist, Kingsley Leggs provides the dark, menacing voice of Audrey II, and Ari Groover, Salome Smith and Joy Woods are back-up dreamboats as the girl-group urchins.



(Top row) Immanuel Houston, Aline Mayagoitia, Jenny Lee Stern, (seated) Chris Collins-Pisano, and Joshua Turchin in *Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation*. Credit: Carol Rosegg

Forbidden Broadway, the first incarnation of which opened the same year as *Little Shop*, is back after a hiatus of five years in a brand-new edition subtitled *The Next Generation*. Creator-writer-director Gerard Alessandrini's beloved spoof of musicals both good and bad has been running in form or another for over 9,000 performances in cities all over the world. This new version has some misses. A Harry Potter bit is kind of obvious and the parody of *The Ferryman* repeated gags Alessandrini used when he skewered another Irish hit *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* 20 years ago. The sketch on Jeremy Pope, who received two Tony nominations in one season, overextending himself, was a bit of a stretch—pardon the pun. But the tight 80 minutes has a pretty high batting average. "Woke-lahoma" devilishly sticks it to Daniel Fish's cynical deconstruction of Oklahoma ("Oh, What a Miserable Concept" subs for "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning"). "There's Gotta Be Something Better Than This" has Bette Midler, Bernadette Peters and Jennifer Holliday navigating new trends to cop their next starring roles. Even film and TV events related to Broadway, such as *Fosse/Verdon* and the Judy Garland bio film, come in a lambasting.

The framing device of a family of tourists being taken on a tour of current Broadway fare by a

smirking Andre De Shields works well and allows for a variety of skits. Immanuel Houston is masterful in his impressions of De Shields, Holliday, and numerous others. Jenny Lee Stern does a brilliant Judy Garland and switches seamlessly to Renee Zellweger playing Garland. Aline Mayagoitia snags Bernadette Peters and Karen Olivo from *Moulin Rouge*. Young Joshua Turchin riotously parodies the excessive emoting in *Dear Evan Hansen* while Chris Collins-Pisano has fun with Lin-Manuel Miranda, Bob Fosse and Harold Prince who leads the cast in a finale from heaven.



Chris McCarrell in *The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical*.

Credit: Jeremy Daniel

The three previously reviewed musicals are Off-Broadway in intimate theaters and clubs. *The Lightning Thief—The Percy Jackson Musical*, based on Rick Riordan's young-adult fantasy novel, began life Off-Broadway a few seasons back and, after a national tour, is now at the Longacre. How does this tween-targeted family tuner settle into big, bad Broadway? If you're a kid, the show is kinda fun with an appealing hero (played with sweet adolescent tenderness by Chris McCarrell) dealing with his new-found status as the son of a Greek god, clever direction by Stephen Brackett, an amiable score by Rob Rokicki, wild bizarre costumes by Sydney Maresca, and tons of confetti and toilet paper shot into the audience. If you're an adult, Joe Tracz's action-adventure book with traces of teen angst and Nickelodeon-level humor, may grow a bit tiring. For compensation, there are edgy performances from Ryan Knowles as a *Grey Gardens*-inspired Medusa and a Paul Lynde-like demon king and Jorreal Javier as Percy's misfit best friend and an all-tempered Dionysus, forced to run a summer camp for the kids of divine beings. The youngsters will probably have a ball, but Mom, Dad, and those without children will get more kicks Off-Broadway.

Scotland, PA: Oct. 23—Dec. 8. Roundabout Theatre Company at the Laura Pels Theatre/Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theater, 111 W. 46th St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 7:30pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: \$59-\$199. (212) 719-1300. www.roundabouttheater.org.

Little Shop of Horrors: Oct. 17—Jan. 19. Westside Theater Upstairs, 404 W. 43rd St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$69—\$179. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation: Oct. 16—Nov. 30. The Triad, 158 W. 72nd St., NYC. Mon, Wed—Thu 7pm, Sat 2:30pm, Sun 3:30pm. Running time: 80 minutes with no intermission. \$65—\$95 plus a two-drink minimum. (212) 279-4200. www.triادنyc.com.

Lightning Thief—The Percy Jackson Musical: Oct. 16—Jan. 5. Longacre Theatre, 220 W. 48th St., NYC. Schedule varies from week to week. Running time: two hours and ten mins. including intermission. \$69—\$199. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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