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Apr 9, 2008 1:34 PM

Seen Off Broadway: This is the angst edition of the column, so sit back, pop a Xanax, and get ready for some big-time woe. Aficionados of high-octane, full-bore acting should get themselves immediately to the Public Theatre, where Tony and Oscar winner Ellen Burstyn and Michael Shannon (of Pulitzer Prize-winner Tracy Letts' shocker *Bug*) are acting up a storm as a mother and son tearing through their car wreck of a relationship in *The Little Flower of East Orange*. It's unfortunate for Burstyn that **Mimi O'Donnell** has not outfitted her with an umbrella for the first act, as she twists and turns semi-deliriously in her hospital bed, the volcanically unhinged Shannon, a stand-in for playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis in this autobiographically charged memory piece, froths at the mouth and spits all over her.



Michael Shannon, Ellen Burstyn, and Elizabeth Canavan in *The Little Flower of East Orange*. Photo: Monique Carboni

One of its better plays, *Jack Goes Boating*, had one of last season's best productions. Design takes a backseat here. **Narelle Sissons'** panels, concealing and revealing modestly defined environments, fly on and off under cover of **Japhy Weideman's** cut-to-the-bone lighting; with the hospital bed gone, there isn't much else to look at in the second act besides the center ring face-off of the two leads. I'm sure **David Van Tieghem** did his usual yeoman work at the sound console—more amplification this *Little Flower* did not, however, need. It runs through May 4.

Jewish anxiety is but one subject of *Marcy in the Galaxy*, a Transport Group musical with book, music, and lyrics by **Nancy Shayne**. It's based on a story she wrote with *Sex and the City* creator **Michael Patrick King**; the title character is anything but a bundle of free-spirited laughs. Marcy is a struggling painter, teetering on the age of 40 and bankruptcy. The *Galaxy* is the 24/7 landmark in Hell's Kitchen, where she fritters away New Year's Day reviewing her so-called life and her knotty relationships with more grounded sibling Sharon (Jenny Fellner) and mom Peppy (Teri Ralston), who is trying to remain upbeat despite the death of her husband and worries over Marcy's future. These vignettes we see in flashbacks, with the two actresses positioned on the second level of **Sandra Goldmark's** diner set; as the present day wears on, the stoic waiter (Jonathan Hammond) attempts rapport, and battle lines are drawn between two life-long "frenemies" (well-played by Janet Carroll and Mary-Pat Green) who act as a cautionary tale for what the increasingly despondent Marcy might become.



Marie Dizzia, Cassie Beck, Sue Jean Kim, and Barrett Foa in *The Drunken City*. Photo: Joan Marcus

Goldmark's set is pretty much denuded of the real *Galaxy's* starry decorations; what I assume was a conscious decision to rid the environment of artificial glamour robs the space of its resident charm. **R. Lee Kennedy's** lighting is also rather stringent on magic, and I suspect the book is at fault for not indicating the passage of time so clearly (no diner would put up with a customer, even a regular, who spends so little money is such a long period). **Kathryn Rohe's** costumes are faultless, as is **Michael Rasbury's** sound design. (Again, the acoustics of the Connelly Theatre downtown, where the show is running through Apr. 20, take the fall for drowning out some of the lyrics.)

The Drunken City keeps the blues at bay till the morning-after

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reckoning. **Adam Bock**, author of this season's comic thriller *The Receptionist*, makes an about face with this quick-paced and punchy Playwrights Horizons comedy, wherein three suburban twentysomethings go to the city for an engagement celebration. Bock has a good ear for how these brash but not-quite-confident people speak, director **Trip Cullman** an expert eye at staging their serio-comic interaction, and costume designer **Jenny Mannis** the right instinct for what they might wear.



Donna Lynn Champlin, Jonathan Hammond, and Teri Ralston in Marcy in the Galaxy. Photo: Carol Rosegg

So, too, is the design in total. Once again set designer **David Korins** has come up with an ingenious solution—the inner turmoil the characters feel as groupthink frays at the edges is echoed by a tilting platform, which they tumble about on as stress rocks their world. Lightbox-type décor, and **Matthew Richards'** incisive lighting, smartly accents the change from suburban plainness to urban sophistication. **Bart Fاسبender's** bright sound design is witty and assured, and delivers a fitting score by **Michael Friedman**. Last call for *The Drunken City*, a nice mix of silliness and sobriety, is Apr. 20. —**Robert Cashill**

Equipment vendors:

The Little Flower of East Orange

Lighting: PRG

Audio: One Dream Sound

The Drunken City

Scenery: PHScenic

Lighting: PRG

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