
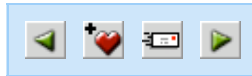


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 @ [2009-10-04](#) 01:34:00



NYMF Roundup, Day 2

The Cure

Book, Music, and Lyrics by Mark Weiser

I'm not going to say that *The Cure* sucks, because A) that would be an obvious thing to say about a(nother) vampire musical and B) it doesn't...most of the time. The show is maybe a draft and a half from being seriously fantastic: at times it's amazing, but then other times it veers into the absurd, sort of like a 1980s-era concept album come to life. It's an ambitious, music-heavy (not through-scored, although close to it) "rock'n'roll fable" (press term) about a coven of vampires living in a nightclub built in a dilapidated church. The group is led by the lawful evil Vladimir, but there are rumblings of rebellion from Rypien, the Hotspur to his Hal. Into this world come dying nightlife columnist Gray (he has an unspecified disease that will take his life within months) and his partyboy pal Alex; their appearance at the club's annual "Communion" party (guess what that's a cover for) causes serious problems, especially when the dissatisfied Unique finds herself falling for the columnist (Alex, for his part, is more than willing to donate blood to the handsome young Sasha).

Weiser is undeniably a gifted composer--the music is dazzling. He is less talented as a lyricist and librettist; it's not the music's fault that the whole enterprise finds itself flying dangerously into camp territory uncomfortably often. (The ballads are less effective, on the whole, than the uptempos.) Sometimes it hits both extremes in the course of one song (particularly noticeable in the opening "Another Night" and the fairly ridiculous "Lullaby"), and there's an extraneous, giggle-inducing subplot about a bunch of heroin-addicted lesbian runaways. The overall effect, though, is undeniably effective; even if the final plot twist is telegraphed fairly early on, the last moments are practically breathtaking.

The cast (led by Michael Buchanan as Gray, Jen Sese as Unique, and Manu Narayan as Rypien) all sing the hell out of the material, although Gregg Goodbrod isn't nearly charismatic enough to play Vladimir, and Michael Buchanan is simply annoying as Alex, more like a whiny six-year-old than anything else. Elizabeth Lucas's direction is sure-handed and makes excellent use of the ATA's built-in catwalk (the dank space is, indeed, perfectly suited for a show set largely in a nightclub), and Mark Hartman leads a five-piece band that seriously rocks. If its problems can be fixed, *The Cure* is likely to become a cult classic.

SCORE: 6 out of 10.

Hurricane

Music and Lyrics by Michael Holland

Book by Michael Holland and Eric Bernat

It comes as no surprise that *Hurricane* is also an ambitious show--that's clear from the moment you look at the front of the program and notice that there are thirty people in the cast. That's not a typo: there are more than a dozen principle characters, plus two separate Greek choruses (an octet of ghosts and a trio of girl singers) and a bunch of nameless ensembleers. The writers are going a real *Titanic* vibe, with lots of characters threading in and; the problem is that *Hurricane* isn't nearly that musical's equal.

The events covered in the show are real: a hurricane unexpectedly destroyed the small coast town of Napatree, RI in 1938. The action is seen from multiple points of view: a family with two young children, a struggling farmer and his rebellious son, a wealthy old woman, her stereotypical Irish maid, the maid's daughter, the daughter's fiance (who, it's implied, might also be a son of the farmer's). Also an "eccentric school bus driver" (no, seriously, that's how he's described in the program). Oh, and a hotshot junior meteorologist and his supervisor at the National Weather Bureau in Washington. And don't forget those girl singers, who interject ironic jazz

songs, nor the ghosts, who move benches and sing in oblique terms about Rhode Island and the sea. The first problem is that few of these characters--even those played by such fine performers as Rita Gardner (the old lady) and Joseph Mahowald (the farmer)--ever advance beyond the one-line descriptions they're given in the cast list. Only Steven Booth and Steven Watts manage to make strong impressions--the former as the young meteorologist (he has the best solo material, particularly a devastating song near the end about his hero, Isaac Cline, and the Galveston Hurricane of 1901), the latter as the troubled busdriver (his "eccentricity" is a cover for the aftereffects of shell shock from World War I). The characterization just isn't written into the material beyond the surface. (I feel, though, that I have to single out T.J. Mannix, who overacts mightily as the weather supervisor. Someone should have stopped that.)

Holland is an extraordinarily talented composer: he's written dense, gorgeous music. A lot of it. And therein lies the second problem: Hurricane is nearly wall-to-wall music; even the few bits of spoken dialogue are underscored. It becomes oppressive and tiring after a while, especially given that many of the songs--as beautiful and well-sung as they may be--don't offer enough effective theatrical build. That his lyrics often strive for cleverness and fall short doesn't help matters--too much becomes too awkward. Some of the songs ought to be dropped and replaced with dialogue; this could help to focus things. There's also the problem that many of the musical themes are repeated without any effective thematic loading--having two unrelated characters sing the same melody is supposed to draw parallels between them, and here that doesn't happen.

Jesse Vargas conducts the cast and the three-piece band; all I heard was the piano and the drums, although there was allegedly a bass, too. The score would be well-served with a fuller orchestra, although I guess the budget was shot on the actors. Michael Bush directs, which means that there's a lot of abstractly-arranged benches and people standing and pointing at things while they sing; if his work here isn't nearly as destructive as what he did with *To Paint the Earth* last year or *Warrior* in 2006, it's far from ideal, and hiring someone else could help, too. The planting and ranting is broken up by bits of choreography by Kelli Barclay.

SCORE: 5 out of 10

Max Understood

Book by Nancy Carlin

Music by Michael Rasbury

Lyrics by Nancy Carlin and Michael Rasbury

Attempting to approach *Max Understood* from any sort of standard musical theatre perspective is fruitless; it's far too unorthodox for that. It's actually difficult to figure out how to approach it at all; peeling it apart at all would make it disintegrate, but **collectively it's deeply moving.**

The idea is that it follows several hours in the life of a severely autistic boy (the Max of the title, played by the extraordinary Marlon Sherman) who inadvertently wanders out of his house while his mother isn't looking and ends up walking around the neighborhood. He runs across various denizens of the area--a couple of snarky kids, a maintenance man with the odd name of Homunculus Jones (Munc for short--he's played by Everett Quinton, who's kind of insufferable)--and his parents (the ever-marvelous Michael Winther and the lovely Mary Mossberg) search for him. However, all of this is seen through Max's eyes, so things are warped: the kid in a hoodie turns into Albert Einstein then launches into a rap about Mount Rushmore (delivered exceptionally by Ramiz Monsef); that one girl becomes Pegasus, and the other turns into a mermaid; the maintenance man becomes a Puck-like guide and philosophical advisor.

Rasbury, who is primarily a sound designer, has created a score that is less traditional musical theatre than it is a soundscape--although there are haunting melodies, the music is surrounded (and occasionally created out of) bits and pieces of noise. (The cast is conducted by T.O. Sterrett, but the music and sound is all prerecorded, which makes sense.) **The lyrics are simplistic and poetic; the book is impressive in its surreality.** David Schweizer's staging is appropriately odd.

But, like I said up top, taking *Max Understood* to pieces will just cause it to fall apart. It's best experienced whole. (And given that the whole is only 70 minutes long, that's not so much of a trial.)

SCORE: 7 out of 10

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