

Observations Along the Road

Theatre Writeups, Musings on the News, Rants and Roadkill Along the Information Superhighway

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A Simple But Timeless Story

Written By: cahwyguy - Sun Jun 08, 2014 @ 7:01 pm PDT

If you're old, like me, you remember the days when music from the theatre moved onto the pop charts. One song that was very popular in the 1960s was "Try to Remember". You might recall the song: "Try to remember the kind of September / When life was slow and oh, so mellow. / Try to remember the kind of September / When grass was green and grain was yellow. / Try to remember the kind of September / When you were a tender and callow fellow. / Try to remember, and if you remember, / Then follow..."



Many years later, I learned that this song was from one of the longest running off-Broadway musicals, "*The Fantastiks*", with book and lyrics by [Tom Jones](#) and music by [Harvey Schmidt](#). It [opened shortly after I was born in 1960, ran for 42 years](#), closed in 2002, was revived off-Broadway in 2006, and is currently on [Broadway](#). Sheeese! It's as old as I am! I first saw the show [in Los Angeles in 2012 at Theatre West](#), and fell in love with its simplicity and its message. There is a reason this show lasts. This year, while perusing the schedule for [the Hollywood Fringe Festival](#), I discovered that [Good People Theatre Co](#), who had done such a great job last year on "*A Man of No Importance*", was doing "*The Fantastiks*". Naturally, I figured out how to squeeze it into my schedule — which is why I was in Hollywood this afternoon. [I'll note that the Marketing person, [Kimberly Fox](#), did provide me with a press kit, for which I'm honored and surprise, as I'm not really a press person]

I took a look at my 2012 synopsis of the show, and I liked what I wrote. Here it is again (the show didn't change 😊). It started by noting the show is framed by the aforementioned "Time to Remember".



Try to remember the kind of September
 When life was slow and oh, so mellow.
 Try to remember the kind of September
 When grass was green and grain was yellow.
 Try to remember the kind of September
 When you were a tender and callow fellow.
 Try to remember, and if you remember,
 Then follow.

Try to remember when life was so tender
 That no one wept except the willow.
 Try to remember when life was so tender
 That dreams were kept beside your pillow.
 Try to remember when life was so tender
 That love was an ember about to billow.
 Try to remember, and if you remember,
 Then follow.

These two verses set you up for the story, which is a timeless story of love supposedly being told by a traveling group of actors. The story concerns two families: Bellomy and his 16 year old daughter Luisa, and Hucklebee and his 20 year old son, Matt. The fathers would like their children to fall in love and marry, but children never do what their parents tell them to do. So they concoct a feud between the families, and build a wall between their houses to drive the children together. To seal the deal, they hire a gallant young actor, El Gallo, to abduct the daughter (in the original version, this was referred to in the traditional sense as “rape”, but that word is no longer P/C) and permit the son to rescue her. This he does in the light of the moon, with the help of two actors, Henry and Mortimer. By the end of Act I, the lovers are together, and the fathers are happy. A perfect picture.

But what seems perfect in the moonlight often looks different in the bright sun. Act II brings the sun. El Gallo presents his bill, and the children learn of the deception. They decide they no longer are in love, and each goes their separate ways. Matt goes out into the world, where he learns the realities. Luisa has a fantasy romance with El Gallo, where they preview a series of romantic adventures through a mask of unreality, while in the background Matt is being abused and beaten by Henry and Mortimer portraying a series of unpleasant employers. Meanwhile, the parents bemoan that children are unlike gardens: with gardens, you “plant a radish, get a radish”, but with children, you never know what you are going to get. Matt eventually returns, and falls back in love with Luisa, this time for real.

Deep in December, it’s nice to remember,
 Although you know the snow will follow.
 Deep in December, it’s nice to remember,
 Without a hurt the heart is hollow.
 Deep in December, it’s nice to remember,
 The fire of September that made us mellow.
 Deep in December, our hearts should remember
 And follow.

The last verse of “Try to Remember” makes the point of the story: “without a hurt, the heart is hollow”. The pure love of children is unrealistic and does not last. It is our experiences and hurts that deepen the love and

affection. It is perhaps this point that clarifies why *The Fantasticks* is such a timeless musical.

The traditional staging of *The Fantasticks* is very simple. Actors' trunks from which all props emerge. Simple stages. A mute who oversees everything and comments on the proceedings with her eyes and movements, nothing more. A piano and drum for music. It is an easy show for a theatre to stage — its success depends on the believability of the performances.

OK, back to present day.

This is truly a fringe show. A platform, some boxes of props, paper, and simple curtains. You can move it in and out in 15 minutes (which is good, because that's about what the Fringe folks give you). Small cast. Simple music. To do more to the story would destroy it; perhaps that's why [the film](#) was so problematic.

As I said, the story didn't change. So how did Good People bring its spin to the show? First, director [Janet Miller \(FB\)](#) started with the view of the show as the original fringe musical... of 1959. She brought back the original instrumentation: one keyboard under the musical direction of [Corey Hirsch \(FB\)](#), and one harpist ([Jillian Risigari-Gai \(FB\)](#)). For the most part, it worked. Certainly, the stretches that were only keyboard, or only harp, worked well. When both were playing, the result was more mixed (especially when the harp overpowered the keyboard). Sometimes it was beautiful keyboard with harp supporting, relaxing and melodic. Other times the notes seemed to clash. Overall, though I think it was a good experiment and might be improved by a little more balance between the two. I'll also note, music-wise, that Ms. Miller did not present the 1959 musical: the word "rape" was mostly elided in deference to the more PC "ravishment" or "rage". I guess, although this is the fringe, we can't be too much on the edge :-). [Edited to Add (ETA): The director noted in a Facebook comment, "As an FYI, we would have liked nothing better than to use the Rape Song (as it is often referred to) but they do not license it anymore, and Musical Theatre International will send a Cease & Desist Notice if you try to sneak it in. So although we wanted to, we thought better of it"]

Performance-wise, this was wonderful. Let's start with their El Gallo, a role that was originally played by [Jerry Orbach](#). Alas, they can't dig up and clone Orbach. One problem with the Theatre West production was that their Gallo, [Lukas Bailey \(FB\)](#), had the acting down but was weak on the singing. Good People's Gallo, [Christopher Karbo \(FB\)](#), was spot on. He had the handsome good looks, he had the manner and the swagger, he had the playfulness, and most importantly, he had a lovely voice. He was a very strong Gallo, and a joy to watch when he was narrating, singing, and fighting.



As Luisa, [Audrey Curd \(FB\)](#) was wonderfully expressive. Her face and her movements perfectly captured the emotions of a 16-year-old, and were a delight. Her singing, for the most part, was also quite good (there were one or two slightly-off notes, but not enough to hinder my enjoyment of her work). I particularly enjoyed her during the "Round and Round" number, her expressions in "This Plum is Too Ripe", and her joy and enthusiasm in "Much More". Matt, portrayed by [Matt Franta \(FB\)](#), was just a little weaker. He captured the 20-year old boy well, and again had strong facial expressions. At the show I was at, he had a few more

off-notes on the songs — nothing wince-worthy, mind you, but just slightly off to my ear. Overall, though, the performance worked well.

My favorite characters in this piece are the fathers. Perhaps this is because they get my favorite songs, and perhaps because I'm a father myself. They've got some of the best comic relief and characters, and their observations on children are spot on. The two performers lucky to fill these shoes were [Matt Stevens \(FB\)](#) as Hucklebee and [Michael P. Wallot \(FB\)](#) as Bellomy. Both were in "Man of No Importance", and both were great. Not surprisingly, I loved them in "Never Say No" and "Plant a Radish", but they were also exceptional in "This Plum is Too Ripe". They just seemed to enjoy each other's company; you could see them as realistic neighbors.



Rounding out the cast were [Joey D'Auria \(FB\)](#) as Henry, the Old Actor; [Corky Loupé \(FB\)](#) as Mortimer, the man who dies; and [Alix Rikki Ogawa \(FB\)](#) as the Mute. When we saw the Theatre West production, the mute was played by [Lee Meriwether](#), who gave a much older, more stern and traditional mute-ish portrayal. Ogawa's mute was delightful. Young, playful, silent, there when you need her, and providing a humorous expression that just provided commentary without words. D'Auria captured the old actor well, perhaps because of his experience (although not in this program, the [Ionescopade](#) program noted he is a former Bozo the clown from Chicago). As for Loupe, well, he died well :-).

Turning to the technical: The set for this production, as noted above, is simple. Some boxes, a raised platform, some poles, a bench, a chair. The rest is all created. [Robert Schroeder \(FB\)](#) handled the task well. Lighting was handled by [Katherine Barrett \(FB\)](#), who also took care of stage management. There were more problems here (that is, with the lighting, not the stage management) — most of which I attribute to the Fringe, the nature of quick move out, and the sharing of theatres. In particular, at some points characters were in shade and difficult to see. [Kathy Gillespie \(FB\)](#) did the costumes, and these worked quite well — especially during the opening scene where they suddenly appear dressed. Rounding out the credits, [Michael P. Wallot](#) did the casting, the aforementioned [Kimberly Fox](#) did marketing, [Rebecca Schroeder \(FB\)](#) was the assistant stage manager, [Oliver Lan](#) did the graphic design, [Kevin Gardner](#) did the program design, and [Zach Payne](#) did social media. "The Fantastiks" was produced by [Good People Theatre \(FB\)](#).

"The Fantastiks" runs through June 29; performances are at the Lillian Theatre, 1 block W of Vine on Santa Monica. You can purchase tickets from [the Fringe Web Site](#).

All this week, I have been writing and obsessing about the situation with [Repertory East Playhouse](#). You can find the background on the story and information from those who were there [in this post](#). I encourage you to read it and draw your own opinions. I've been a subscriber at [REP](#) for many years, and [have seen many shows there](#). In this time of unjustified Internet outrage, the REP needs your support to survive. Donations are always encouraged, and the REP has [a one-week booster campaign going](#) to make up for funds lost due to the unexpected cancelling of Cat. Additionally, encourage those complaining about the REP to actually come and visit the theatre for a future show, and see what this theatre really is. The remainder of the REP season is: "Return to the Forbidden Planet (A Jukebox Musical retelling of Shakespeare's "The Tempest")" (July 11-August 16, 2014); "The Great Gatsby" (September 12-October 18, 2014), and "Sherlock Holmes and the Adventure of the Suicide Club" (November 14-December 13, 2014). Tickets are available through [the REP online box office](#). Most importantly — and the reason I'm mentioning it in this post — **REP will be hosting a town hall**



style meeting to discuss issues of discrimination in the LGBTQ community on Sunday June 22 at 6pm at the REP. There will be a panel discussion, a moderator and audience feedback and questions for local community leaders, REP alum etc. They will be discussing the role's that bullying take and the way that as a community we can best respond. It must be clear: the REP does not stand for bullying in any way, shape, or form — and that includes bullying of members of the LGBTQ community (which is why this whole kerfluffle is odd — had management been informed, they would have had the heckler out of the auditorium and on his way in a Brooklyn Minute. They don't put up with that nonsense.) [#IStandWithTheRep](#).

[Ob. Disclaimer: I am not a trained theatre critic; I am, however, a regular theatre audience. I've been attending live theatre in Los Angeles since 1972; I've been writing up my thoughts on theatre (and the shows I see) since 2004. I do not have theatre training (I'm a computer security specialist), but have learned a lot about theatre over my many years of attending theatre and talking to talented professionals. I pay for all my tickets unless otherwise noted. I believe in telling you about the shows I see to help you form your opinion; it is up to you to determine the weight you give my writeups.]

Upcoming Theatre and Concerts: We lose next weekend to a Bat Mitzvah — but I'm still squeezing in a concert at the Saban Theatre on Monday, June 16: [“To Theo, L’Chaim to Life!” with Tom Paxton, Peter Yarrow, Arlo Guthrie, and more](#). The remainder of the month brings [“Stoneface: The Rise and Fall of Buster Keaton”](#) at the [Pasadena Playhouse \(FB\)](#) on June 22, and [“I’m Not Just a Comic Genius”](#) at [Secret Rose \(FB\)](#) on June 27. July will be busy: [“Ghost”](#) at the [Pantages \(FB\)](#) on 7/5, [“Return to the Forbidden Planet”](#) at [REP East \(FB\)](#) the weekend of 7/12, [“Once”](#) at the [Pantages \(FB\)](#) on 7/19, [“Bye Bye Birdie”](#) at [Cabrillo Music Theatre \(FB\)](#) on 7/26, and [“Family Planning”](#) at [The Colony Theatre \(FB\)](#) on 8/2. August then remains quiet as we work around vacations and such (but I'm eyeing a number of productions in Escondido, including [“Two Gentlemen of Verona”](#) at the [Old Globe](#), and [“Pageant”](#) at the [Cygnet in Old Town](#). What they have at the [Welk](#) (“*Oklahoma*“), [Patio Theatre](#) (“*Fiddler on the Roof*“), and [Moonlight Stage](#) (“*My Fair Lady*“) are all retreats. Things start to get busy again in September and October, with [“The Great Gatsby”](#) at REP, [“What I Learned in Paris”](#) at the Colony, and [“Pippin”](#) at the Pantages. More on that later. As always, I'm keeping my eyes open for interesting productions mentioned on sites such as [Bitter-Lemons](#), and [Musicals in LA](#), as well as productions I see on [Goldstar](#), [LA Stage Tix](#), [Plays411](#).


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