

Theater: Cloudy *Little Miss Sunshine*; Digestive Proust

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LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE **
SOUVENIR ** 1/2

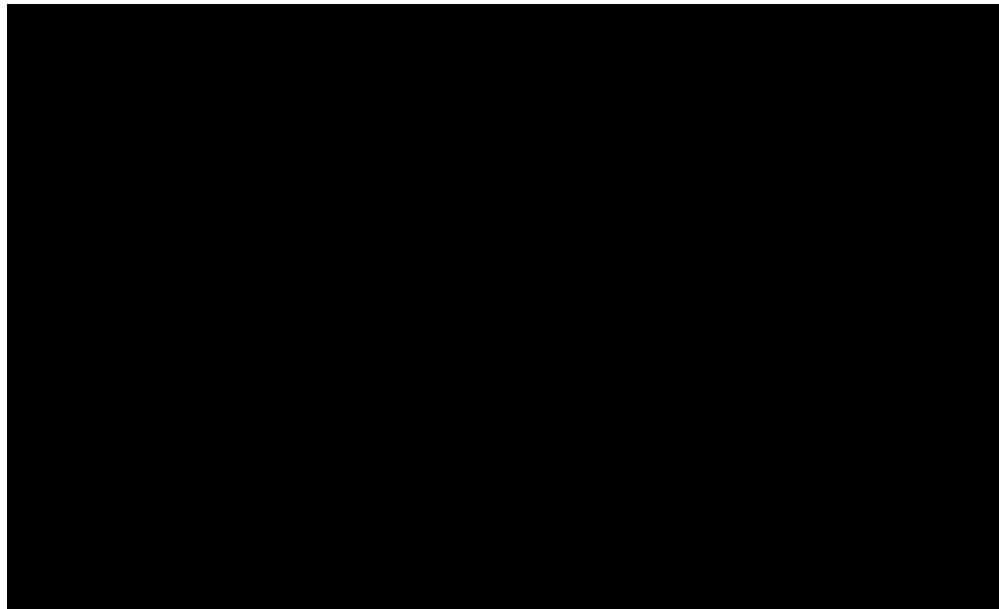
LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE **
2COND STAGE THEATRE

A curious project falls flat. Sometimes, you hear about a book or movie being turned into a musical and think, of course! Other times you think, really? That was certainly my reaction to the announcement that the team behind *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* was tackling the amiable but over-praised Oscar-winning hit comedy *Little Miss Sunshine* into a musical. Most of the story takes place in a vehicle, most of the characters are dour and you just didn't watch the movie and say to yourself, if only Alan Arkin would burst into song! Of course, anything is possible and anyone who attends the theater regularly knows that some shows that seem perfect for musicalization fall flat while others work like a gem.

Sadly, that's not the case here with songs and a score by William Finn that's so generally tuneless you would think the stage was filled with newbies instead of Tony-nominated talent. The book by director James Lapine is no better. Everyone involved has done and will do better work.

The story is a sad one: a middle class family (barely) is falling apart even as it gets larger. Uncle Frank (Rory O'Malley) has shown up looking for shelter -- he's the country's foremost Proust scholar but losing his boyfriend to an academic rival drove Frank to a suicide attempt. Mom (Stephanie J. Block) is shouldering the burden of the bills because her husband Richard (Will Swenson) is out of work and has all his hopes pinned on selling a self-help book. Grumpy grandpa (David Rasche) likes to smoke pot and speak the truth. Teenager Dwayne (Logan Rowland) is refusing to speak until he can enlist in the military flight school of his choice.

Only perky little Olive (a winning Hannah Nordberg) keeps a sunny disposition. By a fluke, she's qualified for a regional beauty pageant and the little kid squeals with delight so winningly that before you know it everyone has piled into a broken down old VW bus to get her to the big event. Hijinks ensue.



An amusingly sarcastic opener (in which the song says the question is not if you'll fail

but when) proves about the only bright spot in a show where the cast frantically rearranges chairs on stage to suggest traveling cross country in a vehicle and rather unconvincingly bursts into song every once in a while. Sheryl and Richard are always fighting so we get a flashback to their first romance...and they're fighting there as well! Truly, the book struggles to deepen these characters who were never more than an excuse for comic one-liners to begin with.

It climaxes with a desperate attempt to mimic the movie's feel-good finale but the original song by Finn can't compete with the impact of a little girl dancing to "Super Freak Part 1" by Rick James even if it were good, which it isn't. Since the characters never establish themselves, the actors all feel like pale imitations of the film's cast, which does no one any favors, especially with Rasche, who has to growl his way through lines much funnier when they were growled first by Arkin.

On the bright side, the two kids acquit themselves well. Rowland has the big shoes of the talented Paul Dano to fill but manages to chart his own path. And Nordberg really is cute as Olive, avoiding all the clichés of an adorable tyke and creating a genuine little girl. One clever idea has her taunted by a group of bitchy little girls but this conceit disappears fast -- even though their brief moments are the funniest in the show. In multiple small parts, Jennifer Sanchez, Wesley Taylor and Josh Lamon all manage to score some amusing turns, though one funny song at the beauty pageant was more than enough. (The second jokey tune by Miss California was pointless.) The scenic and projection design by Beowulf Boritt was succinct (a map stretched from the floor to the ceiling and out over the audience) while the costumes by Jennifer Caprio were fun but not too silly (except when they should be).

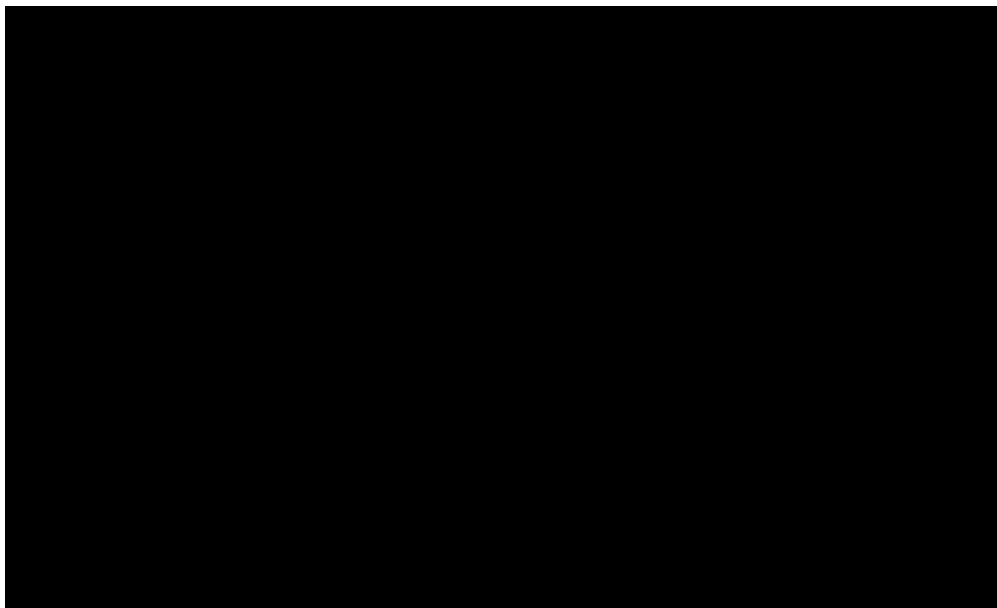
The lead actors were let down by the material, with Swenson sounding flat and uncomfortable in his songs while Block in a thankless role had one decent tune to deliver. The film *Little Miss Sunshine* was a happy accident. This attempt at a stage musical with such major talent on board is a sad one.

SOUVENIR ** 1/2 **ABRONS ARTS CENTER**

Oddly, the brother in *Little Miss Sunshine* is America's foremost Proust scholar. Now here's a one-man show from Ireland that uses Proust's landmark work as a springboard for a new theatrical piece that riffs on that Everest of reading while incorporating a Springsteen song on a harmonium, two goldfish, audience participation and View-Master. It felt like a fringe offering and indeed after seeing the show I looked it up and discovered it was indeed, the sort of pleasant show you might stumble upon at a fringe festival (as at any festival, most offerings are not very good) and make a mental note to keep an eye out for the company's next work.

In this case, that first effort by Dead Centre has made it to New York. Good for them, though *Souvenir* -- written and performed by Bush Moukarzel and directed by Ben Kidd -- would have been better served being slotted in one of our fringe fests rather than a stand-alone run. It can boast of ambition and some modest clever touches but doesn't hold up to the spotlight as a fully formed work.

It begins evocatively enough with some winning pop music and a bemused Moukarzel standing in front of an audience planning to read from Proust but finding the pages are falling out of his copies. Soon, loose paper is fluttering down from the rafters after he tosses them up, music is swelling and the show is off to a strong start.



It's a one hour riff on the landmark work *Remembrance Of Things Past* (or if you want to be a stickler for the less evocative but more accurate translation of the title, *In Search Of Lost Time*). Funnily enough, I saw the show on November 14, the 100th anniversary of the publication of *Swann's Way*, volume one of his magnum opus which runs thousands of pages. I've read them all while my guest had never read a word; unfortunately, whichever way you approach the show as a reader in terms of Proust, it is admirable but not engaging emotionally.

Souvenir is strongest when it's least tied to Proust. A memory of Proust at the theater slides into a memory of Moukartzel attending a performance of Proust. Proust's jealous love of Albertine is evoked when Moukartzel plays Springsteen's "I'm On Fire" on a handy harmonium. An attempt to create a public/private moment leads to the handing out of View-Masters so the entire audience can quietly contemplate several images both together and alone.

Certain touches work well, such as a darkened room with the actor spotlighted by one bulb while sporting glasses in the shape of a bicycle or the finale where sand cascades down from the ceiling like the sands of time, of course. One bit of audience participation works fine; but when it's followed by another bit of audience participation, it feels forced given the short length of the show. Too much time is spent charting the plotlines of the book, from the famous opening (an inevitable inclusion) to Albertine, Albertine, Albertine and more Albertine. Each passage is fine in and of itself, but the cumulative effect is counterproductive: all you get is a mere outline of the story you aren't being told when *Souvenir* is best at offering up Moukartzel's story of reading the books and how they seeped into his life.

The View-Masters are typical: it's a fresh gesture (and getting enough of them for an audience of 50 was probably the biggest expense of the show). But then we're offered about five or six images and three of them are jokes about trying to get us to remember how great the show was (such as pretending Springsteen made a guest appearance or flashing forward to a rave review). And the remaining, repetitive images don't amount to much when we're hungering for some memorable final flourish to take away with us. Instead, all we get is the same image of Proust twice, though the second time it includes -- I think -- the dates 1871 (his birth) to 2013. Meaning Proust died this year? That his work still lives? (Then why the end date?) Meaning what, exactly?

Moukartzel had a quiet confidence at the start but as the show began to squeeze in more and more of Proust and less and less of their impressions of Proust, his delivery began to feel rushed and awkward. I enjoyed his humor, the gobbling of madeleines that would lead to him collapsing under the weight of memories, the blurring of actor and author and so on. Perhaps if it's confident enough to be more off center down the road, Dead Centre will prove worth keeping an eye on.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnicula: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *

Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *
Women Or Nothing ** 1/2
Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play * 1/2
You Never Can Tell ***
Romeo And Juliet *
Arguendo **
August Wilson's American Century Cycle ****
The Glass Menagerie ** 1/2
Lady Day * 1/2
Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse ****
Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical ** 1/2
Bronx Bombers * 1/2
Romeo & Juliet at CSC * 1/2
A Night With Janis Joplin **
The Winslow Boy ***
Juno And The Paycock **
How I Learned To Drive **
Fun Home **
Two Boys at the Met **
Big Fish **

A Time To Kill * 1/2
Year Of The Rooster ***
The Snow Geese ** 1/2
A Midsummer Night's Dream ** 1/2
The Lady in Red Converses With Diablo ** 1/2
After Midnight ***
La Soiree ***
Nothing To Hide ** 1/2
The Patron Saint Of Sea Monsters **
Die Frau Ohne Schatten/The Woman Without A Shadow at the Met
Little Miss Sunshine **
Souvenir ** 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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