



trodding the boards

by Brian Sands
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New in New York

Sure, the world is a mess, the headlines depress, and it doesn't look like this will be getting any less for a while, but if you happen to be in Manhattan, three new Broadway shows can help you effervesce. For a few hours at least.

If you're searching for the epitome of a feel-good musical, head to the **August Wilson Theatre** for **Groundhog Day**, the stage adaptation of the classic Bill Murray film.

As you may recall, **Groundhog Day** tells of Phil Connors, an arrogant Pittsburgh TV weatherman who, during an assignment covering the annual Groundhog Day event in Punxsutawney, finds himself caught in a time loop, repeating the same day over and over again. After doing all sorts of illicit things and even committing suicide numerous times, he begins to re-examine his priorities and finds a new outlook on life.

Under Hugh Vanstone's phenomenal lighting that provides every-hour-of-the-day variations for wintry Pennsylvania luminescence, Rob Howell's wonderful pop-up set is reminiscent of a classic Hallmark holiday card. Librettist Danny Rubin, who wrote the original screenplay, wisely hasn't tampered too much with what worked the first time.

If the show takes a little while to spark up, once things start repeating, it settles into an appropriately sweet'n'sour groove, conquering the challenge of replicating the same scenes by keeping it fresh with slight modifications.

As Phil, Andy Karl starts out marvelously obnoxious and off-putting, but because of this handsome actor's innate decency, you gladly become invested in Phil's **Twilight Zone**-ish dilemma. (Overcoming an accident in previews, Karl was still wearing a knee brace when I saw the show a few weeks later, but it certainly didn't inhibit his performance.)

The lovely Barrett Doss takes on Andie MacDowell's role of Rita Hanson, a local TV producer forced to work with Phil, who falls in and out and in love again with him. Making her Broadway starring debut, Doss charmingly displays both toughness and vulnerability, and should have a major career ahead of her.

Director Matthew Warchus and composer Tim Minchin, who successfully teamed up for **Matilda the Musical**, reunite for **Groundhog Day**.

Warchus's fabulous staging is endlessly inventive conjuring up car chases and a whole townful of people. Without

resorting to the mega-bucks of movies, Warchus creates stage magic through imagination, particularly in Act Two's *If I Had My Time Again*.

Minchin's lyrics, especially in Act One, burst with gleeful, sardonic wit, but then, along with Rubin's book, reveal an emotional depth in the second act and, for the most part, get even better. A couple of numbers, one in which Phil consults some fraudulent doctors and another for a secondary character, seemed unnecessary but were tolerable.

I just wish two things were different in **Groundhog Day**: (a) that Minchin's tunes were more memorable and character-defining as they were in **Matilda**; here, the melodies come off as generic with none lingering after the curtain comes down and (b) that Phil's eventual conversion to nice guy was less easy, more earned; whether it's something in Rubin's book or Karl's inherent niceness with its hints of an eventual happy ending, as opposed to Murray's orneriness, the final emotional pay-off could be more substantial.

Don't let these reservations, however, stand in your way of seeing this exuberant and funfunfun show.

"Fun" is and isn't a word I would use to describe **Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812**.

Not fun because, well, it's based on a section of Tolstoy's "laff riot" **War and Peace** and deals with innocence corrupted, disillusion and all those other wacky things Leo T. is known for.

But **FUN!** because Rachel Chavkin's brilliant immersive staging presents Dave Malloy's sung-through adaptation with such ebullient ingenuity that only a humorless Bolshevik would not thoroughly enjoy it.

Comet begins with tasty pierogies being served by cast members and a *Prologue* that, somewhat unnecessarily, tells you how confusing this story will be. But once it settles down, **Comet** presents a fairly straightforward tale of love and passion, sex and jealousy, family drama and difficult lessons learned.

Malloy's score, accurately described by the composer as an "electropop opera," blends Russian folk and classical music with rock and jazz influences for a unique experience. Wildly boisterous chorus numbers alternate with gorgeous, touching arias in minor keys that bring out the characters' yearnings and sad situations.

Mimi Lien's spectacular set transforms the **Imperial Theatre** and allows actors & musicians to move freely throughout it. While apparently there

isn't a bad seat in the house, I sat on the stage with a magnificent view of the auditorium and an occasional bead of sweat or spit landing on me from a performer excitedly declaiming right behind me. Some audience members even get pulled into the action.

The topnotch cast and chorus, nearly all of whom play instruments as well as sing and dance, bestow welcome diversity on Tolstoy's Russians. Denée Benton makes an adorable Natasha; along with Brittain Ashford (the noble Sonya) and Gelsey Bell (forlorn as Mary) each break your heart in different ways. Nicholas Belton scores as both a doddering father and his suave son.

Amber Gray imbues the manipulative, licentious Hélène with earthy naughtiness. Pop star Josh Groban, who recently completed his run, made Pierre a worthy sad sack, doomed to be disap-

[continued on 22

under the gaydar ...from 15

hate to admit it, this place was actually pretty good. There was a chocolate fountain bar, seriously. Anyway, there was about twenty of us who had dinner and caught up while wishing Daryl (aka Countess) a wonderful birthday.

The following day, the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau hosted their quarterly Business After Hours at the Orpheum Theatre. This beautifully restored showplace for the city was introducing the hospitality community to their new party venue open in their basement area called The Ice Pit. The Orpheum is a nearly century-old Beaux Arts theater in the heart of New Orleans' Central Business District. Built in 1918, this iconic space has hosted vaudeville acts, silent films, movies, Mardi Gras balls, weddings, and countless concerts. The Ice Pit was the room underneath the theatre where they brought large blocks of ice to cool the space upstairs. An elaborate set of air ducts were used to move the cold air from the basement throughout the venue. Now it is a party place that would be perfect for a Speakeasy theme.

The only thing I did besides work my first weekend was go and see *Wonder Woman* at the Broad Theatre. Oh my Hera, they did bring the Amazonian princess' story to vivid life. I loved the movie and it was even more fun that some people dressed in costume. We will don a disguise for just about anything in this city.

On Tuesday of the following week, I did more in one night than most people do all weekend. First, I attended a little hospitality event at Galatoire's which was as expected fabulous. One of the premier old line restaurants in the city still is as incredible as always, from the food and service to the splendid atmosphere. Most people know about their main dining rooms, but there is a host

of private rooms you are able to hold your event within upstairs including a third floor space for about thirty people with a private balcony. If you have not been to Galatoire's in a while, it is about time to go back and revisit an old friend.

The next day Harrah's hosted a hospitality event at their restaurant on Fulton Street, Manning's. More than just a sports bar, this venue has a private room upstairs for private events that overlooks the street with a balcony and spacious courtyard below.

Friday, I kicked off my Pride weekend with two gatherings in the French Quarter. The first was to celebrate Stephen Perry, CEO of the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, who was the honorary grand marshal this year of the Pride Parade. Dustin Woehrmann and Jeff Hebert opened up their lovely French Quarter abode for an elegant soiree. There were politicians, hospitality powerhouses, media and a host of local celebrities present. Mark Romig gave a moving toast followed by Stephen himself who is an incredible supporter of the LGBT community. And what a setting, Jeff and Dustin's house is just spectacular. Afterwards, some friends and I caught the tail end of the Halloween New Orleans happy hour party at Good Friends Bar. There was a packed house upstairs and we get ready for another big holiday in New Orleans. Our city does not have any reasons not to throw a party. Halloween in June, perfect.

Saturday was all about Pride. I know Pride has been growing steadily every year, but this year I felt like there were more people in town to celebrate Pride here than in years past. Also, I loved all the corporate sponsors and all the entries in the parade. The block party outside The Phoenix in the Marigny was a great change of pace and a perfect location for the event. The booths were both informative and had talented vendors and the entertainment was phenomenal. They actually had a performer doing fun disco dance music. It was amazing to dance in the street to Anais St. John performing her Donna Summer show. Then the parade itself was one of the crowning achievements of the weekend. I even got to meet Jake Shears and Ms. Kelly Ripa (who I LOVE!). Opting to be a spectator this year, I enjoyed it just as much as if I was in the mix, but I have to say, I may have to be in the parade next year. After the parade, we hit the bars for more cocktails hanging in the Marigny at Mags 940 and The Phoenix. Congrats to the Pride team on another banner year.

I ended my two weeks on the couch almost all day Sunday having a day of rest and recuperation while I binge watched "Death in Paradise," a BBC murder mystery television show. Surprisingly yes, I have days like that, where you need to recharge your batteries to get ready for the next two weeks. So here we go!

Kenneth Blake

as
Madonna

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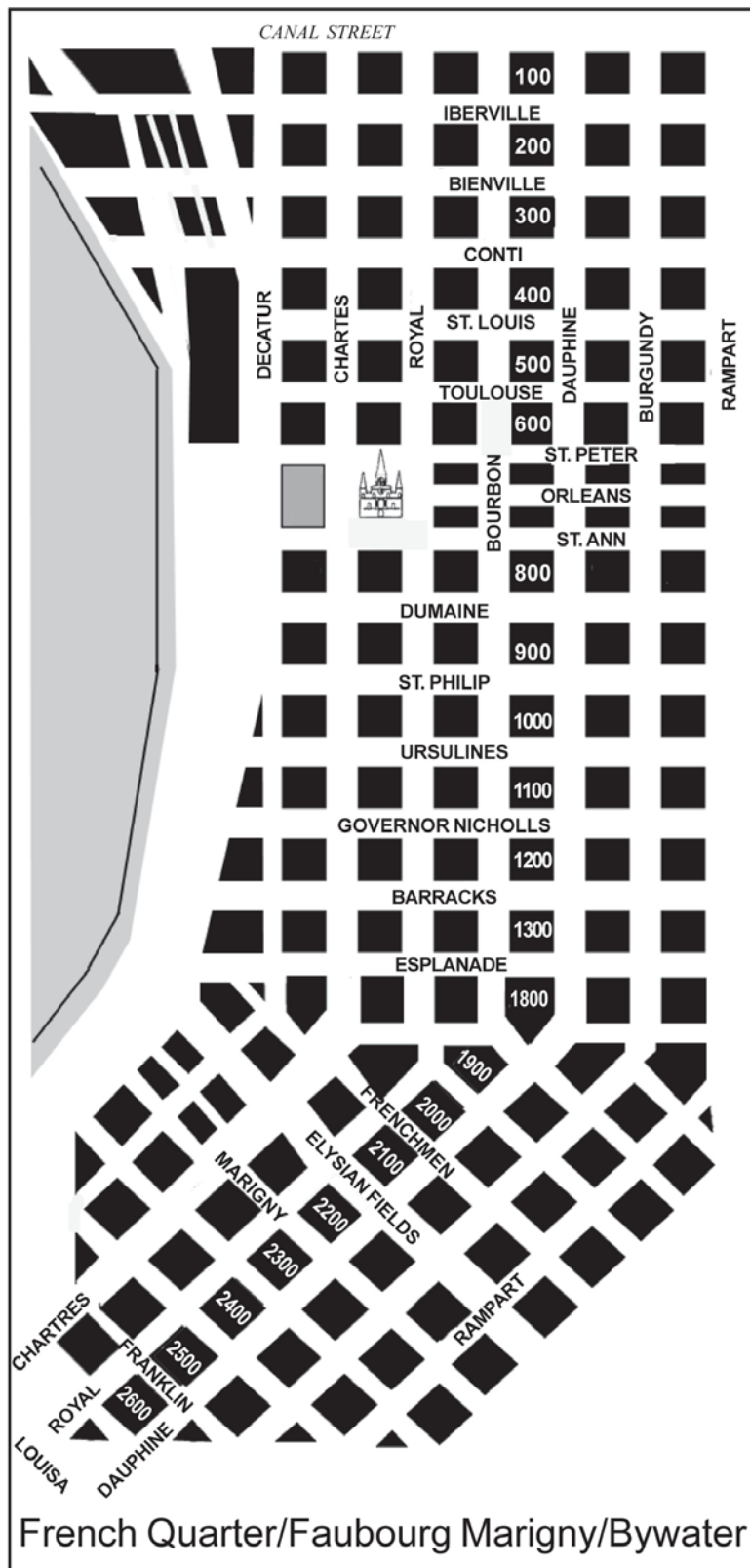
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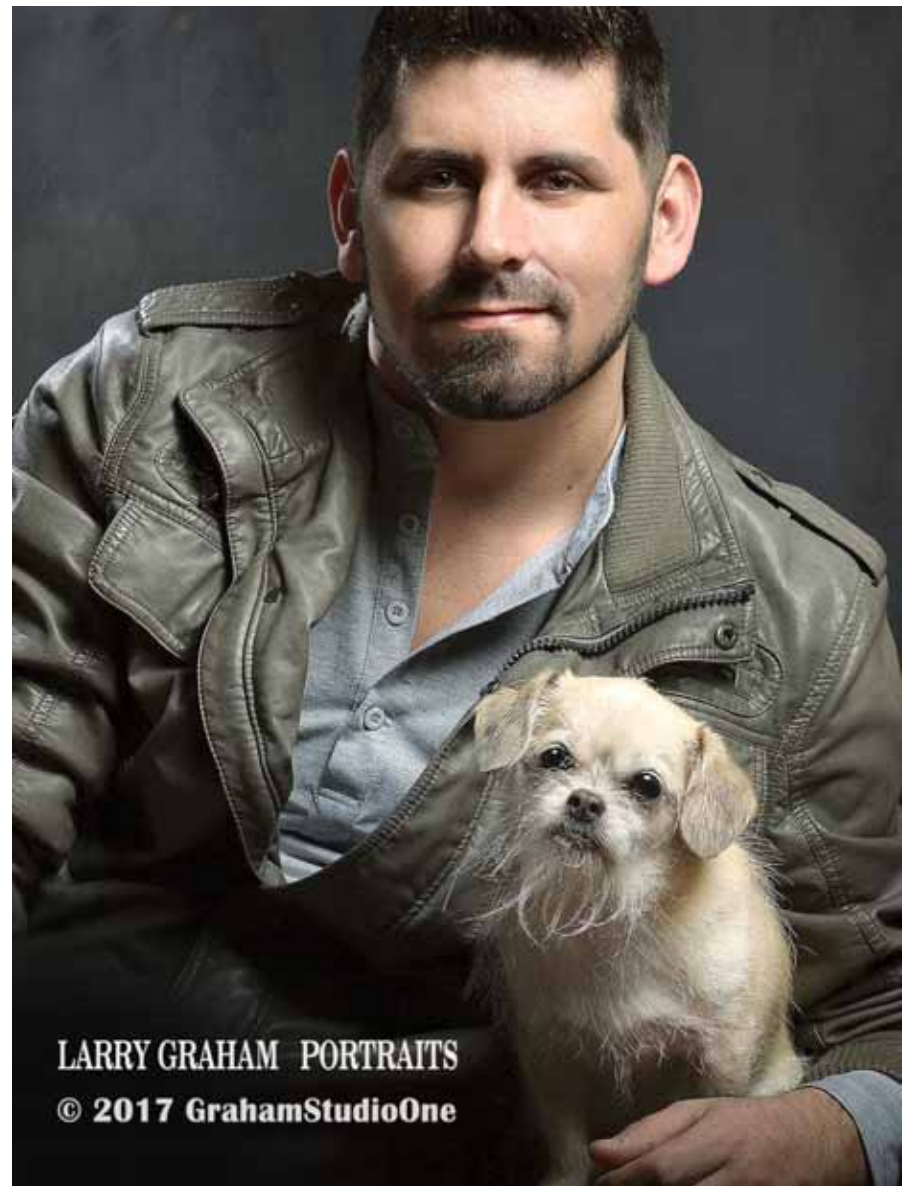
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