

trodding the boards ...from M-24

Ho-Ho-Ho!

A Year With Frog and Toad at Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre

In its return engagement, **A Year With Frog and Toad** remained as thoroughly delightful as when first presented by Brandt Blocker Productions in Metairie this past January. Bob Edes as Toad is not as innately Bufonidae as “Uncle Wayne” Daigrepont was in the role, but Edes beautifully brought out Toad’s neuroses and made a perfect foil to the ever sanguine Frog of Jimmy Murphy. Jennifer Marks capably filled Liz Argus’ shoes (and paws and wings and flippers as well) joining Lindsey Price & Scott Sauber who continued to enchant as various forest creatures.

Post-Katrina, **A Year With Frog and Toad** was a vital demonstration of Mother Nature’s more benign side. It would be a welcome addition to NOLA’s theater scene in *any* year BBP would care to revive it.

The Toast of New Orleans at The Morial Convention Center Auditorium

One could simply say that the New Orleans Opera Association’s recent gala concert was a lovely evening of music and song and leave it at that.

One could, but it wouldn’t be an entirely apt description.

While nice, and in some cases spectacular, music was made one wonders why more A-list singers were not on the roster for this concert as opposed to the line-up for last Spring’s gala led by Placido Domingo—scheduling conflicts? Lack of funds to bring them (and their retinues?) here? A diminuendo of commitment from such performers to aid in New Orleans’ rebirth? Or some combination of all three?

That said, there was much for which to commend this evening. First and foremost, Dolora Zajick proved why she is one of the world’s reigning dramatic mezzo-sopranos with Donizetti’s *O mon Fernand* from **La Favorita** and **Cavalleria Rusticana’s** *Easter Hymn*. Though she may move like a washerwoman, Zajick’s voice of steel coated with cream hit high notes effortlessly with crystal clear tone. Would we had gotten more than merely two offerings from this magnificent artist.

The rising tenor Simon O’Neill also made a very favorable impression bringing his clarion voice to arias from **IPagliacci** and especially **Die Walküre**. I hope we’ll hear more from him in the future.

Of the seven other vocalists, some sang strongly (Raymond Aceto’s glowering Mefistofeles, Alaine Rodin’s shimmering *Summertime*, Lisette Oropesa’s gorgeously floated notes in *Caro nome*, Jane Gilbert’s compelling Dalila) but none fully had the vocal sheen and distinctive personality that would set them apart from their peers.

Veteran singer and New Orleans’ native Anthony Laciura served as master of ceremonies; if he brought some welcome levity to the proceedings, he overdid it at times—he was begging to be sliced up and served as a ham sandwich—and could have been better rehearsed.



Jimmy Murphy and Bob Edes in *A Year With Frog and Toad*

Robert Lyall led the orchestra with his customary assurance through a wide range of styles, adjusting the tempo at a moment’s notice for the somewhat challenged Laciura. The New Orleans Opera Chorus got things off to a bracing start with Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Procession of the Nobles* and gave strong support throughout the evening.

And then there was Eldar, a 19-year-old Kyrgyzstani jazz piano prodigy strangely shoe-horned into the program. Lyall pointedly introduced him as the “Newest sensation”. Eldar played beautifully, especially Ellington’s *Take the A Train*, but no better than any of the many piano virtuosos who call New Orleans home. I wonder how long he’ll last until another “Newest sensation” comes along?

Jacques Brel is Alive and Well & Living in Paris at Delgado Community College

The late Belgian songsmith Jacques Brel burst into the American consciousness courtesy of this revue that ran for years in Greenwich Village and is now again playing off-Broadway. Though more than three decades have passed since the debut of **Jacques Brel is Alive...**, this collection of songs remains remarkable for the range and potency of the humor and melodies and insights and humanity that shine forth from them.

Recently seen at Delgado, this brisk, 75 minute production was fortunate to have the stirring voice of Bryan Wagar who provided powerful, superb renditions of *Amsterdam* and *Next*, and generally anchored the proceedings. Jen Allison was another strong presence bringing touching depth to *Old Folks* among other numbers.

Brel makes some punishing vocal demands and this cast was not always able to meet them. For example, Tracey Collins did well with *My Death* and *Sons of...* but some of the material was simply beyond her range. Overall, the ensemble numbers fared best particularly *Brussels* as well as *Marathon*, Timid *Frieda* and the finale, *If We Only Have Love*.

Timothy Baker’s simple, occasionally static, direction didn’t fulfill every nuance that Brel calls for and not all numbers were given the interpretation they deserved. But enough of them did to make for a generally enjoyable evening.

Living All Alone/The Phyllis Hyman Story at the Anthony Bean Community Theater

Clearly, Anthony Bean greatly admired the late Phyllis Hyman and I suspect she touched him in some profound way. Yet his “jazzical play” about the recording/stage star does little to explain what drove her, what was important about her and why we should care.

Strangely structured into a few brief scenes separated by lengthy concert recreations and concluding with a series of testimonials from everyday people as to what Hyman meant to them, **Living All Alone** doesn’t so much dramatize Hyman’s life, e.g. her problems with her weight and mental illness, her work for AIDS organizations, her challenges in the showbiz world, but spoon-feeds its audience the information sometimes giving out the same details two and three times.

We see Hyman’s manager Glenda trying to control and guide her to little avail. We observe some self-important fans interacting with the star in her dressing room in a preposterous way. We’re treated to a diva scene in a restaurant. But where’s the drama?

Instead, Bean chose to give us “Phyllis 2” to represent the demons inside the singer’s head. As embodied by Stacey

Markey, she taunts Hyman from the other side of a mirror and needles her about all her insecurities. It’s effective but a little of this goes a long way. And because we never got a feel for what Hyman overcame to get where she did—her rise seems fairly easy, a case of being in the right place at the right time—nor a full sense of her vocal power, the testimonials at the end rang rather hollow.

Much of **Living All Alone** felt half-baked. Is it about an artist fighting emotional problems and inner demons? Or about a successful performer who doesn’t understand why she’s not more successful? When Glenda is blamed for Hyman not being included on the **Waiting To Exhale** soundtrack, it’s unclear if Glenda didn’t do her job well enough, if Hyman wasn’t good enough (after all, her competition included Whitney, Aretha, Patti, Gladys and others) or if it was simply an artistic choice by the movie’s producers.

Living All Alone was not aided by Paris Robertson’s performance in the starring role. I’m not sure if anyone could overcome the slackness of the script but, while Robertson possesses a decent voice, it’s no knockout and she failed to capture the desperate need to connect with an audience the way true divas, especially tragic ones, do. The other cast members were sometimes sincere, sometimes farcical and rarely convincing which was surprising given what a gifted director Bean is, particularly evidenced this season with outstanding productions of **Fences**, **The Old Settler** and **Joe Turner’s Come and Gone**. Ironically, though she sang only a little, Yolanda Cephus’ strong sultry voice indicated she might have been a better choice to portray Hyman.

Oh well, on to 2007—ABCT’s season next year looks like a promising one.

The Great (?) White Way

For a recent visit to New York, I thought I chose carefully what shows to see, but each wound up disappointing me. Herewith a cautionary guide:

For 1½ acts, **Grey Gardens** (Walter Kerr Theatre) was a thoroughly engrossing exploration of the lives of the Beales,

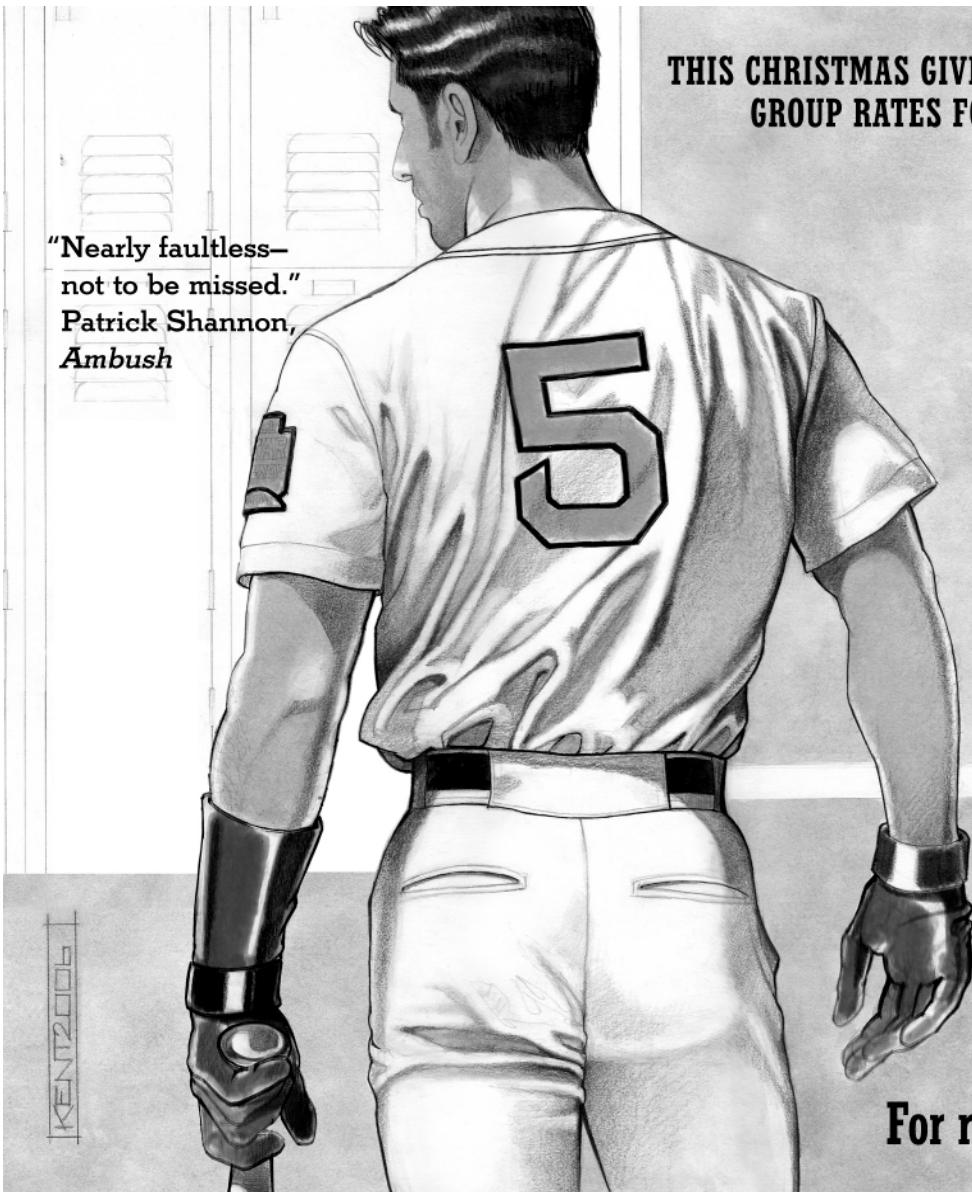
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obituary



Charlene Ann Schneider, age 66, of Bay St. Louis, MS passed away on Sunday, December 3, 2006 in Bay St. Louis, MS. She was a native of Bay St. Louis, MS. She was of the Catholic Faith. She was the owner of Charlene’s Womans Private Club in New Orleans, LA for 20 years. Charlene and Linda started the Breast Cancer Foundation “M.A.P.” at Hancock Medical Center which was for women with low incomes and woman that are uninsured for free mammograms. She was preceded in death by her parents, Charles M. and Virginia M. LaFontaine Schneider. She is survived by her lifetime partner of 20 years, Linda Tucker of Bay St. Louis, MS; 2 sisters, Marsha Schneider Ladner of Pica-yune, MS, Dianne E. Schneider of Pica-yune, MS; and several nieces and nephews. She will also be sadly missed by her many numerous friends.

In Lieu of flowers the family prefers donations to Hancock Medical Center Foundation-MAP, P.O. Box 2790, Bay St. Louis, MS 39521.



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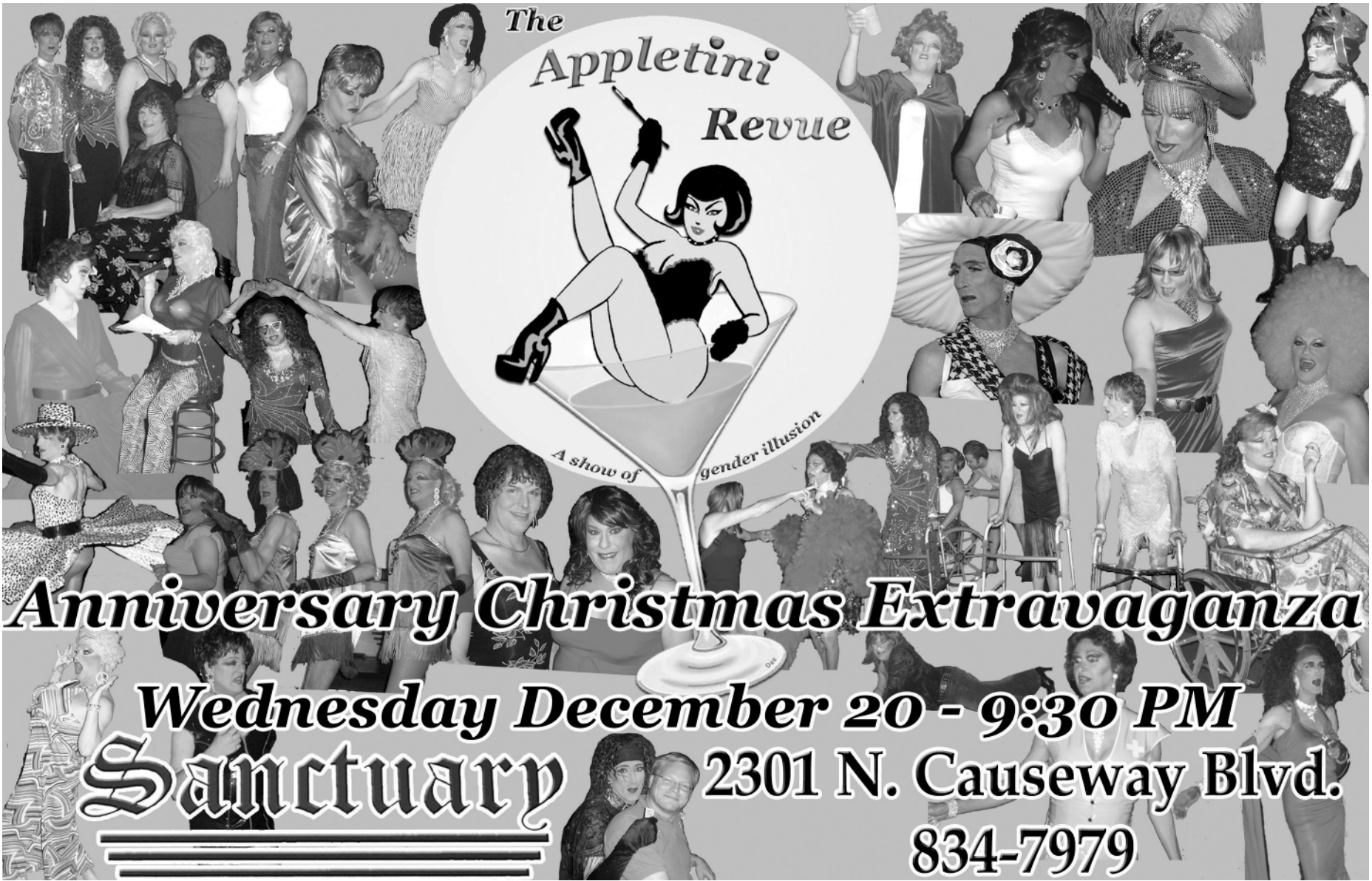
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mère et fille, Jackie O's relatives who were immortalized in the Maysles Brothers' documentary of the same name. Act One takes us to the ritzy East Hampton estate where a party is about to happen to announce "Little" Edie Beale's engagement to Joseph Kennedy, Jr. Things don't work out as anticipated and Act Two fast forwards 32 years to 1973 when the Beale women are living in virtual squalor.

The first act may be build-up and exposition but it is wonderfully done as we see the stultifying effect that parents can have on even adult children. Scott Frankel's pleasingly complex music is redolent of the period yet has a contemporary edge. And how can you not love Michael Korie's intricately witty lyrics which rhyme "Fanny Hill" with "de Tocqueville"?

The focus narrows in the second act as middle-aged "Little" Edie desperately wants to escape her mother's psychological clutches and self-deludingly thinks she can still find fame & fortune on Manhattan stages. It's heart-breaking but it runs out of steam about midway through with an extraneous musical number featuring Norman Vincent Peale and songs that belabor already made points.

Christine Ebersole's finely honed performance as the smugly patrician Edith Bouvier Beale in Act One and then as the eccentric "Little" Edie in Act Two has become so quickly iconic that parodies of it have already sprouted up. Mary Louise Wilson's elderly Edith is no less manipulative just because she's aged; Wilson bravely eschews sentiment and presents her as the gargoyle she is.

The always reliable John McMartin made a stalwart "Major" Bouvier who disapproves of his daughter's lifestyle. Erin Davie created a superlative portrait of young "Little" Edie yearning to escape Mama yet already damaged goods. Cute Matt Cavanaugh was a too-upright-for-his-own-good Kennedy with a perfect Boston Brahmin accent though I found his Act Two slacker neighbor a bit too studied. Young Sarah Hyland's proper Jacqueline Bouvier was exactly how you'd picture an 11-year-old Jackie O to be.

Eleven year olds of a different sort are to be found in **Mary Poppins** (New Amsterdam Theatre), the latest Disney arrival on Broadway. Not as dark as the West End version, not as light as the film, this **Mary** never quite finds the proper balance.

On the plus side, for a musical in which there's much talk of flying kites, **Mary Poppins** often soars through the skies on a wave of pure theatrical magic as when statues come to life or Bert (Gavin Lee) dances around the proscenium or the entire stage is technocolorized before your eyes. Yet the show's best moments are little things like a handshake or a child's kiss that have the power to bring a lump to the throat.

Of George Stiles and Anthony Drewe's new songs only *Temper, Temper*, in which playroom toys come to menacing life, can justifiably stand beside the Sherman Brothers' classic original ones, though some of these have been more distorted than "adapted." Shame though on Disney and producer/co-creator Cameron Mackintosh for inserting the garish *Anything Can Happen* with the entire cast cavorting underneath a giant umbrella.

As Mary, lacking Julie Andrews' charm and charisma, Ashley Brown comes off as plasticky. The emphasis thus shifts to the Banks clan and the transformative journey they (Daniel Jenkins, Rebecca Luker, Katherine Leigh Doherty and Matthew Gumley—all most worthy) go on. The rest of the cast is decent enough but Dick van Dyke, Ed Wynn, Glynis Johns, Jane Darwell and Elsa Lancaster are sorely missed.

Depth and illumination are sorely missing from **The Little Dog Laughed** (Cort Theatre), Douglas Carter (**As Bees in Honey Drown**) Beane's new comedy. It's fun, delightful even, but easy, very easy stuff that fails to fulfill its potential, and challenges viewers not a whit.

Dog details what happens when an up-and-coming screen actor's agent discovers him in bed with a hustler and the lengths she goes to cover up his "slight recurring case of homosexuality." Complications ensue when he acquires the screen rights to a hot new play featuring a gay love story, falls in love with the hustler and when said hustler's girlfriend turns out to be pregnant.

Such fascinating plotlines beg for an insightful approach but here exist as mere comedy fodder. Beane provides some wonderful scenes but an overall disconnectedness pervades the play as he manipulates his characters rather than allowing a more plausible destiny to play itself

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out. Fortunately, Beane's witty definitions of gay Boy Scouts ("the merit badge that dare not speak its name"), prostitutes ("People you pay to leave afterwards") and many other such lines make the evening pass painlessly.

Dominating **Dog** is Julie White's avaricious, amoral, calculating and desperately power-seeking agent Diane. With a voice like sandpaper, it's basically a one, maybe a one-and-a-half, note performance, but what a note with endless details & filigree & curlicues & oh so ro-co-co-co. Though Tom Everett Scott and Ari Graynor are fine as, respectively, the actor and girlfriend (I'm didn't entirely buy Johnny Galecki's hustler), the stage noticeably deflates whenever White leaves it.

Would that we could move the galvanic White onto the stage of the Ethel Barrymore Theatre where John Doyle's revival of **Company** could use something more at its core. Much as I adored his **Sweeney Todd** last year and brilliant as Sondheim's score is, **Company** remains a show whose main character, Bobby (Raúl Esparza), is the hole in the center of a doughnut.

Much has been made about Bobby's inability to commit to a relationship. Let's face it, nowadays such indecisiveness about females by a "straight" man can't help but make you wonder if he's gay. (Esparza's recent self-outing doesn't clarify the situation any.) Or maybe Bobby truly doesn't want/need someone else and can't admit that he's content to play the field. In any case, George Furth's weak book never shows what makes Bobby so attractive to his friends and why they should so care about his marriage status. Frankly, I wish we could compact the show as is into one act and use the second act to see if Bobby finds "somebody [to] crowd me with love [and] force me to care."

Doyle's staging is clean and sharp, especially so for *Side by Side by Side*, but not nearly as inventive as for **Sweeney** and the instrument-playing cast doesn't have the same impact. With an ever-smug look on his face, Esparza didn't do much for me. As some of the ladies in his life Angel Desai (Marta/*Another Hundred People*), Heather Laws (Amy/*Getting Married Today*), Elizabeth Stanley (April/*Barcelona*) and Kelly Jeanne Grant (Kathy), did.

Off-Broadway wasn't any better than Broadway. **Gutenberg! The Musical!** (59E59 Theater) parodies backer's auditions and bad musicals, neither of which need to be parodied. Ludicrous in its naivete, sophomoric in its humor, its songs all kinda sounding alike, **Gutenberg** comes off as an overextended **Saturday Night Live** sketch from one of its lesser seasons.

Just to prove I'm not a complete Grinch, however, there's one show, the new musical **Spring Awakening** that, while I'm not obligated to review it, I'll simply say "Do not miss it." It nearly made up for all the rest.

CHOP CHOP: New Orleans Restaurant Guide

Bywater Bar.B.Que, 3162 Dauphine St., is noted for its gumbo, barbeque, pizza, sandwiches and specials. Tuesday is Mexican day and night, while Sunday evening is Prime Rib night. Hours are 11am-9pm Thurs. thru Tues. Closed Wed. Call 944.4445 for additional info.

Cafe Amelie, 912 Royal St., offers romantic courtyard or indoor dining along with both eclectic culinary creations and drinks, plus live entertainment some evenings. Serving lunch: Wed.-Sun. 11am-3pm, dinner: Wed.-Sun. 5-10pm, Sat. & Sun. Brunch 11am-3pm. Call 412.8965 for reservations or additional information.

Clover Grill, 900 Bourbon St., is open 7 days and features breakfast including build your own omelettes. But let's not forget their fab burgers grilled right under a hub cap and then there's all those sandwiches, sides, desserts and shakes. Call 598.1010 or visit **CloverGrill.COM**.

Elizabeth's Restaurant, 601 Gallier St. It's slogan, real food done real good, says it all. You will find some of the best breakfast, lunch and dinner specialties available in town. Phone 944.9272 for hours and information.

Marigny Perks, 2401 Burgundy, serves gourmet coffee, sandwiches, pastries, danish and cakes. Open 7 days 7am-10pm. Call 948.7401 for additional information.

Meauxbar Bistro, 942 N. Rampart St., serves classic contemporary bistro fare in the Quarter on the edge. Serving dinner and drinks Tues.-Sat. 6-10pm. Call 569.9979 for reservations or information.

Mona Lisa Restaurant, 1212 Royal St., features Italian specialties including salads, pizzas, sandwiches and both lunch and dinner entrees. Lunch 11am-5pm Thurs.-Mon., Dinner 5pm-10pm 7 days. Call 522.6746 for info.

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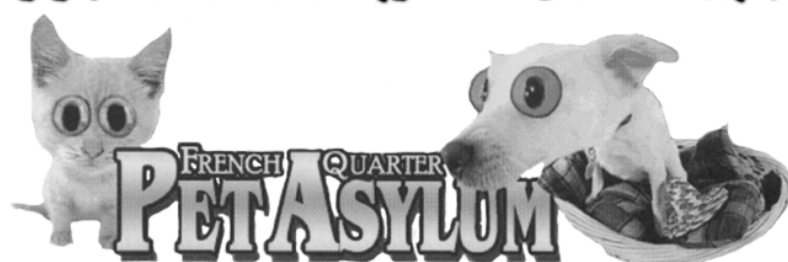
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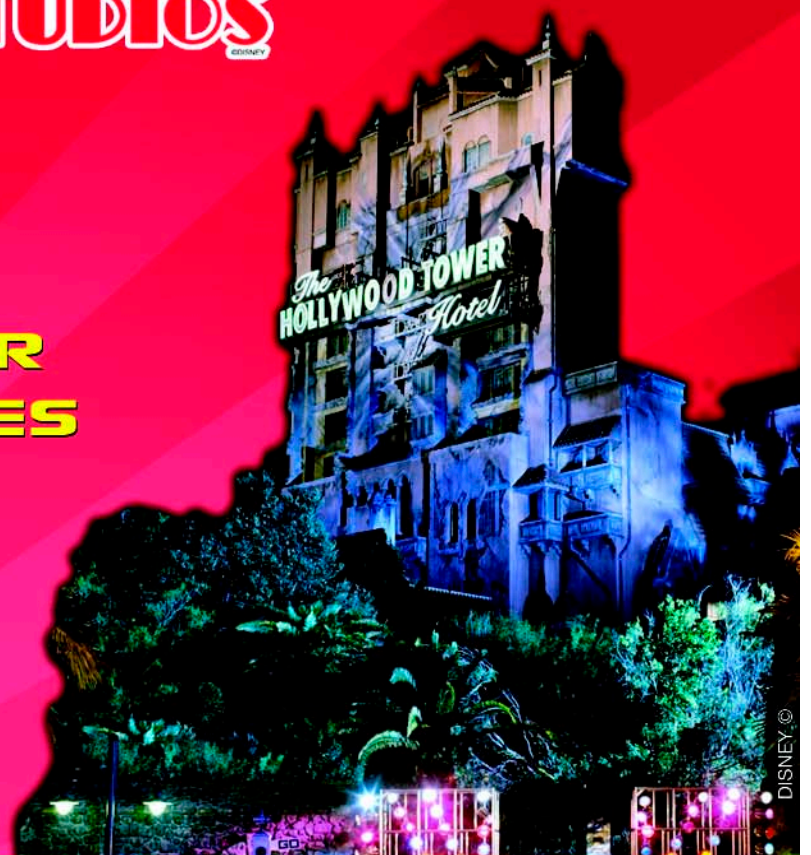
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