

An Un-asked for Review of a Variety Show Performed by Children in New Zealand

By A. F. Martin

WHY WE LIKE IT: *An American ‘teacher of dramaturgy and playwriting’ residing in New Zealand, attends a variety children’s show sponsored by something called the ‘NZ Scouts Organization’. The author admitted in an email to not knowing exactly what category her submission falls under and we admit to loving it no matter where it falls. Outré to say the least, you’re in for an entertaining read, which is more than we can say for most ‘reviews’. But this ringside gonzo takes on a life of its own. There’s a healthy dose of post-modernism in the author’s improv delivery as she flips through a gamut of emotions—often conflicting.*

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It’s a lengthy piece, but we find ourselves bouncing along merrily, leaping from one bizarre performance to another—the bizzarro meter rising with each new act—while we yuck about the reviewer’s ‘existential’ despair at the massacre of what she holds dear. The prose is so yummy you could lick it off the floor. But we warn you, Little Red Riding Hood may never be the same.

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It is 6:30 PM on a cold, July evening in Dunedin, New Zealand. I arrive at the Mayfair Theater – a large, old theatre next to a giant supermarket - and meet my friend Yuval, an eccentric Israeli geologist. He has procured us tickets for something called the “Gang Show,” and does not know anything about it. I also do not know what a Gang Show is, and we are both in high spirits about a mystery show that could delight us with potentially anything.

We take our seats next to a former theatre student of mine, and I notice she is wearing a kind of Girl Scouts uniform (though in New Zealand this is called Girl Guides) and then I notice that a *lot* of people around us are wearing a scout’s uniform, or a red decorative scarf. I become skeptical about whatever is about to happen.

The show begins and I quickly understand that this is a variety show performed by children (and for some reason some older teenagers) loosely held together by a “plot.” As someone who teaches dramaturgy and playwriting for a living, there is nothing I enjoy more than mostly tangential scenes and songs. I remember this is a three hour show and suddenly notice that the seats are not comfortable.

The rest of this is an entirely unfair, unwarranted review of said variety show performed by children. I am aware that nobody asked me to do this, and that such a work is not intended to be scrutinized by critics. As I will discuss later, I don’t entirely understand what this work intends to *do*, but I’m pretty sure it has no relationship with critical reception.

The first number is “The Greatest Show,” which is from a movie musical about P.T. Barnum starring Hugh Jackman. This number does not seem related to any plot we are about to see; it is just simply telling us that this is “The Greatest Show.” In a way it’s a logical first number to a variety show performed by children; it’s upbeat and jazz hands are possible. I do not enjoy this song for its musical qualities but understand why it was chosen.

Then there is a bizarre scene/song with 3 small priests. I think this is to use the priest costumes. I ask my former student about the costumes and she tells me “yeah, they always have the priest costumes in the Gang Show.” I learn that they do a different Gang Show every two years and it takes six months to make. I find this kind of depressing. Six months is a lot of time. I also learn the red scarves people are wearing mean that they have worked for at least 100 hours on a Gang Show. 100 hours is also a long time. I start to think about how difficult it is to create meaning in life and decide that I will not crochet a scarf tomorrow.

Next, a girl dressed as a cat tells us that she is “puss in boots.” She has a big book of “tall tales” and apparently intends to tell us some stories. It’s difficult to figure out what she wants to do with the book of tall tales because she is mostly making a lot of distracting, unfunny puns. I make a quick judgement of this girl’s acting ability, and she doesn’t score well. I wonder if that means she can sing, and I soon find out that the answer is “mostly.” She basically sings the correct notes, but entirely lacks charisma and the song is very easy and repetitive. It’s about being a cat. I remember this is a child and she is working with a terrible script, and decide I will judge her less harshly. Despite this decision, I immediately think “but like, Stranger Things? Her being 13 isn’t an excuse.”

Then a guy who is maybe 16 or 17 comes out dressed as wolf. He seems to take this role very seriously, which makes me feel very embarrassed for him, and for the other older teenagers (some, I later learn from my student, are as old as 23, which I find disturbing). This kid’s interpretation of the wolf is that the wolf is a sex symbol. He pouts and kind of slinks around the stage. The best adjective to describe what he is going for is “sultry.” He sings a song and steals half of the book. The cat girl is dismayed.... because... now she can’t tell us half of the stories? Actually, it’s really unclear what the cat girl’s motivation is with the book, or what the sultry wolf kid wants with the book. But this, ladies and gentlemen, is the main conflict that will drive this “play.”

After this “inciting incident,” it’s hard to explain the jumbled series of scenes that happen next. This is because I was very confused during all of it, and several times felt it might have been hilarious if I had come high. Basically, they chose segments from different fairy tales (Jack and the Beanstalk, Rapunzel, Snow White, ...), and found ways to work songs into these scenes. Some of the songs

were musical theatre-y, and others were pop songs. During the rest of Act 1, a couple of notable things happened:

- Somebody *mentioned* green eggs and ham, which led into a song and dance about green eggs and ham with I AM NOT JOKING 50 children dressed as cats in hats. They emerge out of nowhere and it's shocking. Where did all these costumes come from and why was making 50 fucking matching outfits SOLELY for a 3 minute dance scene that has nothing to do with anything something that happened??? This song and dance abruptly ended, and I immediately changed my mind and decided that the whole tangent was absurdist, comic brilliance. I vow to steal this genius move and put it into my next play.
- There were a lot of New Zealand government jokes and none of them were funny. Not just to me; I mean, nobody laughed at any of them. The children saying them also seemed to not understand the jokes.
- They had 2 boys play Cinderella's evil step-sisters and this got the biggest laughs of the night. It made me think about why putting guys in dresses is somehow always funny. I decide I will do some research on this when I get home, as I imagine some academic theatre people have written serious articles about how cross dressing on stage is funny *because* it taps into the deep truth that gender is actually performative; it makes *fun* of something that should, indeed, be made fun of, so it is both enjoyable and a useful social commentary. I then wonder if 2019 PC people have begun to find an issue with putting dudes in dresses for laughs but stop caring because now I'm starting to think that the 15 year old in the blonde wig might actually be a good actor. He is singing a song about being a woman but he has the funniest, completely dead-pan look on his face and stares straight into the audience the entire time. He is killing it.
- A lot of fairy tale segments were performed, and then suddenly we are in Havana. As soon as I see the sign "Havana café" I am onto these children. They will use this as an excuse to sing that Havava ooo nah nah song I kept hearing on the radio when I was in L.A. about 6 months ago. They have now gone way too far. Having an entirely unjustified location, genre, and plot shift to enable the singing of one terrible pop song is too much. The dead-pan kid warmed me up but now I am cold inside.
- They do sing the Havana ooo nah nah song. I am angry. But then, half way through, I remember they are children in New Zealand and this is hilarious. They are singing the song with a lot of musical theatre-y articulation. When they sing, as a group, "he took me back to East Atlanta, ooh nah nah," I begin to wonder if any of these children – about 40% of which are actually teenagers and therefore have no excuse for not having critical reasoning skills – even consider *any* of the words they say or sing in this show, and what this means for national education. Do they question things? Never mind, this isn't funny.
- The Havana song transitions straight into 'Living La Vida Loca' by Ricky Martin. I miss this song. It is funny when sung in a New Zealand accent – they pronounce dancing like dAHncing (like the British), so it's way too fancy sounding. The heavy articulation is also very inappropriate for this song and I begin to believe that whoever is the musical director just googled "things to say to children while directing them in a musical" and just said those things (i.e. "articulate! Always stare right into the audience! Smile!") regardless of a song's tone and genre.
- In Havana, the cat girl who is our narrator I guess falls in love with someone named Margarita. It is never explained who Margarita is, or why they are in Havana. Act 1 is over.

During intermission, I learn some things about Gang Show. There is a couple who runs it, and they have been writing these shows for 40 years. It is a part of the NZ Scouts organization. Around 180 kids audition for this and about 70 get in. They have a *lot* costumes available to them, which explains the 20 costumes for each child I have already seen. I don't know where the funding for this comes from.

Act 2 is a much greater shit show than Act 1. This is shocking as Act 1 already had the messiest dramaturgy of anything I have ever seen, ever. However, Act 2 is really something special. More fairy tale characters are "introduced" – and I put that in quotes, because they really do something that's more like "appearing out of nowhere, assuming the audience already knows who they are." Sleeping beauty comes out to sing with the other princesses at some point, but it is played by the actress who was Jack's mom (from the Jack and the Beanstalk narrative thread). At some point, Jack is mentioned and she says 'hey, that's my son!' which hurts my brain. I really have no idea if it was meant as some kind of meta joke or if they actually lost track of who this actress was supposed to be at that moment. I decide it's the latter and I begin to wonder why I didn't leave at intermission.

Most of the second act deals with the sultry wolf and Little Red. Sometimes the wolf has the half of the book he stole and sings about having the book, and other times, he is seen book-less and is only concerned with eating and maybe having sex with Little Red. I don't remember which songs they had him sing to her, but it didn't seem like he platonically wanted to eat her if you know what I mean. At this point I begin to think the whole Little Red Riding Hood story is actually super creepy to begin with – I feel like we shouldn't do a story that seems like a metaphor for rape anymore? Also she is saved by some random dude at the end, right? What does that suggest? Anyway, the wolf basically functions in 2 separate plot lines, guided by 2 separate motivations, which is an objective dramaturgical mistake.

Eventually the wolf lures little red to the cottage where she's going, and eats her. Puss in boots girl comes to rescue little red (how did she know where they were?), and slices the wolf open. Little red, 7 dwarves, and some other people emerge. Somewhere here puss in boots also gets wolf's part of the book back, which is the only thing, plot-wise, that is ever resolved. Then, sultry wolf comes back to life for no reason what so ever and he is resurrected as Elvis; he is actually wearing an Elvis costume. My mouth literally drops. What the fuck is happening. He sings a sexy song to Little Red, who is not convinced by his seduction but sultry wolf kid knows this is his time to shine and really has fun with it. I begin to think that, of all of these children, sultry wolf is the best singer and actor. He can actually hit some super low notes which is impressive. He also has charisma. I wonder why he is doing this show and start to think maybe he's trying to get with one of these scout girls. Yes, that must be the case. From now on I will try to figure out who he is trying to sleep with.

From here on, it's just half an hour of extra songs and some reprises, with a few scenes that try to convince you that these songs are related to something. But the main plot line has been resolved, you say?! They should know that you can't hold an audience's attention for long after the resolution! The conflict is over, right? What is driving this? Nothing. Nothing is driving this. I suddenly remember smoking a little too much weed and watching a live-action version of *The Emperor's New Groove* from the catwalk of a theatre in Ireland – which haunted me for several months and made me question even my attraction to the *idea* of theatre – and I now am very thankful that I am sober in this moment. The marijuanas would not have made this funny; it would have made it traumatic.

While these final nonsense songs and deeply unfunny scenes go on, I make some observations about the directing style and then proceed to go into an existential hole.

Re. the directing style: the kid who played the blonde step sister - who I earlier proclaimed to be some kind of comic genius - is actually just incapable of not looking like a dead fish. I find this out because he plays another role in Act 2 where he is supposed to exude joy (I know this from contextual clues), and he does the same thing he did as the step sister; he looks blank, and stares straight into the audience. In this new context, it is not funny; it is vaguely horrifying. I then begin to notice that a *lot* of the kids here just look blank, or blank with a smile (even more horrifying), and a *loooooooot* of them just stare into the audience. They do not “cheat” to the audience. They stare. I think maybe whoever directed this got tired of telling kids to STOP FUCKING TURNING AND LOOKING AT EACH OTHER ON STAGE and decided that cheating would be too sophisticated a concept so told them to just face the audience and address everything to them.

This brings me to the existential hole. Clearly, this is a bad direction to give to anyone. If any of these children are interested in actually doing theatre at some point in their lives, they are just learning bad habits here. I then begin to think about the function of Gang Show. What is it doing, who is it for, and is it good? Obviously it is not good as a piece of art – any competent reader of this review should have figured that out by now – but is it *good* in the sense of contributing to the progress of anyone involved? The short answer is probably not, and here is the long answer:

I don't think anyone benefits from being part of a bad product. Or at least – I think they would benefit *more* if they were pushed to make something better, and improve; group activities like sports and theatre can be good just because they are fun and bring people together, but they are *always better* if the people on the team are actually working towards success. Towards meaning and progress. I think progress – whether it's *personal* progress or *societal*/group progress – is how we create meaning in life. It's what is exciting, fulfilling... it's how we know we're moving forward instead of, potentially, backwards, or even worse, remaining in some kind of soul-sucking stasis. I don't think children think about this – not normal children anyway; I mean, I used to ruminate about this shit as a 6 year old, but I don't think that's typical – but they *feel* it. I think. I was on sports teams as a kid where nobody cared if I actually did well and I don't think I learned anything from those experiences. I was also on sports teams where somebody was like, hey, let's all really work together and try to succeed, and of course those experiences were more meaningful. Similarly, the most meaningful shows of my career have been the ones where artistic progress was made; where we pushed ourselves, and started out better than we were when we went in. If they also communicated well, we can also say they were good pieces of art, not just inherently good to make.

Maybe I'm missing the point of Gang Show because I just don't understand why anybody would make something just to make it no matter how terrible and incoherent it is (by the way – I get that adults like to watch their children perform, but if it's *just for the parents* that's a ridiculous use of time and money and I cannot respect that), but I also think I'm right. It doesn't matter whether or not these kids want to have a career in theatre – I mean, I am definitely not an athlete as an adult but swimming as a teenager, on a team that pushed me to be better, taught me a lot; I learned about discipline, team work, and community. I think learning is a virtue, and the *6 fucking months* these kids spent rehearsing could have been used for actual instruction and progress instead of making a 3 hour fever dream.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I accidentally witnessed a children's variety show in New Zealand, and was so angry afterwards that I couldn't sleep until I wrote about it. I later realized it's pretty funny to write a review about a children's show since I think you're definitely not supposed to do that.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Amanda Faye Martin is an American writer and dramaturg. She attended Kenyon College where she learned how to think by wandering around Amish cornfields, and holds an MFA in Dramaturgy from the A.R.T. Institute at Harvard University. She is currently the Playwriting Fellow at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand.*