

# **THE MORNING LINE**

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- FROM: Michelle Farabaugh
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February 6, 2014



### **Oprah Winfrey Eyes ''night, Mother' for Broadway Debut**

By Patrick Healy

Oprah Winfrey is in talks to make her Broadway debut in a revival of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play "night, Mother," starring opposite Tony-Award winner Audra McDonald as a mother struggling to stop her daughter from killing herself, according to two theater executives familiar with the plans.

The Tony winner George C. Wolfe ("Lucky Guy") would direct the production, which is being aimed for the 2015-16 Broadway season. The two theater executives spoke on condition of anonymity to share details about a production that is currently confidential.

The lead producer of the project, Scott Sanders, confirmed on Thursday that he was in discussions with Ms. Winfrey to make her Broadway debut, but he declined to identify the play or discuss other details.

"Oprah has had a longstanding desire to act on Broadway," Mr. Sanders said. "She understands how unique and challenging performing live on stage will be as an actress. She and I have been looking at a number of plays and roles in order to find material and a character that truly resonate with her. We've recently read something that we're both excited about but are not yet ready to officially announce the specifics."

Ms. Winfrey and Ms. McDonald read "'night, Mother" together last year with Mr. Wolfe in Mr. Sanders's apartment, according to the two theater executives, and all involved were happy with the results. The 2015-16 timing is driven by scheduling availability, according to the theater executives.

Ms. Winfrey, who delivered an acclaimed film performance in "Lee Daniels' The Butler" last year, and Mr. Sanders are currently working together on a Broadway revival of the musical "The Color Purple," possibly for the 2014-15 theater season. They produced the original "Color Purple" production on Broadway in 2005; the new version would be the stripped-down production that the Tony winner John Doyle directed to much praise in London last summer.

Ms. McDonald, a five-time Tony winner who was last on Broadway in "The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess," and whose last Broadway play was "A Raisin in the Sun" in 2004 (for which she won a Tony), has theater projects and other work planned for the 2014-15 season.

"'night, Mother" was written by Marsha Norman, who worked with Ms. Winfrey and Mr. Sanders as the book writer on "The Color Purple."

The two-character drama originally opened on Broadway in 1983 and ran for a year, earning Tony nominations for best play and best actress for both stars, Anne Pitoniak and Kathy Bates. There was a short-lived revival on Broadway in the 2004-5 season starring Brenda Blethyn and Edie Falco.



Representatives for Ms. Winfrey did not return requests for comment; a spokesman for Ms. McDonald declined comment.

NY Times

February 6, 2014

### If You Stage It, They Will Come 'Bronx Bombers' at Circle in the Square

By Charles Isherwood

Talk about your fantasy baseball team. Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, for starters. Plus Mickey Mantle and Joe DiMaggio. Add the catcher Elston Howard, the first black player on the New York Yankees roster, and throw in the team's current captain, Derek Jeter.

Strange though it may sound, this pinstriped pantheon sits down to dine together in a dream sequence from "Bronx Bombers," an affectionate celebration of Yankee greatness (with a smidgen of Yankee angst) written and directed by Eric Simonson. The play, which opened at the Circle in the Square on Thursday night, is the third in Mr. Simonson's series of rah-rah dramas about famous sports figures to be presented on Broadway, following "Lombardi" and "Magic/Bird," two similarly workmanlike plays about legendary names from the worlds of football and basketball.

With both the Yankees and Major League Baseball Properties among its presenters, you can be sure that Mr. Simonson's play, which pivots on the Yankees' tumultuous 1977 season and stars Peter Scolari as a harried Yogi Berra, will not throw too many spitballs or even inside fastballs in the direction of the sport. At one point during that dream dinner, someone refers to fears that fans would not return after a certain calamity. The reference is to Sept. 11, not the drug scandal that has tarnished baseball in recent years. (Guess who's not coming to dinner? Alex Rodriguez.)

The first scene is set in a Boston hotel room, where Berra is holding a private meeting in an attempt to tamp down the animosities that flared during the previous day's loss to the Yankees' longtime rivals, the Red Sox. The manager Billy Martin and the outfielder Reggie Jackson almost came to blows in the dugout after Martin pulled Jackson from a game, believing he hadn't hustled to a short ball.

Berra has invited the antagonists to air their beefs, and corralled the team captain, Thurman Munson (a cool Bill Dawes), to act as his co-referee. Martin, played with haywire energy by Keith Nobbs, enters in full fume, his anger inflamed by the fear that the Yankees owner, George Steinbrenner, will give him the shove — an outcome that has the volatile Martin breaking down in tears. His devotion to the team is expressed in words that will moisten the eyes of rabid fans: "There's no better feeling in the world than when I put on the pinstripes."

Berra spritzes the room with similar sentiments, imploring Jackson to make nice by evoking fabled lineups of the past. "That's what the Yankees are more than anything else," Berra says. "A team. Always have been, and you and Billy and Thurman and all the other guys got to find a way to become that team."

But Jackson (a suavely funny Francois Battiste) expresses a different view, one that may put those fans in mind of the current Yankee franchise, with its constellation of high-price-tag players who haven't been bringing home the pennants lately. Jackson was a star with the Oakland A's imported to add some wattage to the team — both in the media and on the field — but he stands firm when Berra suggests he must subordinate himself to the collective.



"I didn't come here to melt into someone else's idea of a team," he says coolly. "I came here to be Reggie Jackson, and as far as I can tell, that's exactly why Mr. Steinbrenner brought me here — for me to be me."

While Jackson and Martin trade accusations, with Munson mostly siding with the manager, Berra scurries around trying to patch things up. Naturally, this involves a bubbling stream of Yogi-isms that allow Mr. Simonson to inject some humor into the proceedings. ("Whatever's gonna happen, it ain't happened yet.") Mr. Scolari, who gives a funny, feisty performance, delivers these in a nicely offhand style that manages to keep the zing without turning each verbal pratfall into a cartoon caption.

The drama inherent in clashing egos gives "Bronx Bombers" some natural juice in the early innings, but the suspense about whether Martin will be axed — and Berra will agree to replace him — more or less gets benched in the play's second act. (With that, you'll be glad to hear, my small repertoire of baseball metaphors has been exhausted.) After a night spent fretting about the situation to his wife, Carmen (a warm Tracy Shayne, Mr. Scolari's wife), Berra seems to wake up on the day of the big old-timers dinner he's hosting in some sort of netherworld.

One by one, the greats of past teams troop in. Nothing too strange about the presence of the button-down DiMaggio (Chris Henry Coffey) or the cocky Mantle (Mr. Dawes again) being present. And even Howard (Mr. Battiste) was still alive in 1977. But it's a bit peculiar when Gehrig (John Wernke) and Ruth (C. J. Wilson) arrive, followed by Jeter (Christopher Jackson), who was not even playing Little League at the time.

Yankee lovers may not find this sudden lurch into fantasy particularly worrisome. They will enjoy watching these fabled greats impersonated by a skilled cast of actors, with Mr. Coffey's showboating Mantle, teasing his teammate DiMaggio for his sleek suit and terse style, and Mr. Wilson's Ruth, full of barroom boisterousness, hogging much of the spotlight. But the play doesn't negotiate the move from the real world to the dream world very smoothly. (A sentimental coda to the play returns us to reality, in time for the farewell game at the old Yankee Stadium.)

None of the attendees seems to find the presence of the long-dead Ruth or Gehrig particularly bizarre. ("Thank you so much for coming," Carmen says to Lou, utterly non-nonplussed.) The players more or less settle down and start trading lore and jokes as if they'd all been sharing a dugout for years.

Fans of rival teams like the Red Sox or the Mets (I confess!) infiltrating the audience might take a more jaundiced view of the players' nonchalance. It figures, they might sourly observe, that a Yankee would expect to exist on some heightened plane, one that confers instant immortality.

### Bronx Bombers

Written and directed by Eric Simonson; conceived by Fran Kirmser; sets by Beowulf Boritt; costumes by David C. Woolard; lighting by Jason Lyons; music and sound by Lindsay Jones; hair and wig design by Paul Huntley; production stage manager, Adam John Hunter; production manager, Aurora Productions; general manager, Richards/Climan. Presented by Ms. Kirmser, Tony Ponturo, Quinvita and Primary Stages, in association with the New York Yankees and Major League Baseball Properties. At the Circle in the Square, 235 West 50th Street, Manhattan; 212-239-6200, telecharge.com. Running time: 2 hours 10 minutes.

#### NY Times

WITH: Peter Scolari (Yogi Berra), Francois Battiste (Reggie Jackson/Elston Howard), Chris Henry Coffey (Joe DiMaggio), Bill Dawes (Thurman Munson/Mickey Mantle), Christopher Jackson (Bobby Sturges/Derek Jeter), Keith Nobbs (Billy Martin/Mark), Tracy Shayne (Carmen Berra), John Wernke (Lou Gehrig) and C. J. Wilson (Babe Ruth).

**NY Times** 

February 6, 2014

## If Nature's a Generous Benefactor, a Girl Can't Help Sharing Her Gifts

'Little Me' at City Center Stars Christian Borle

By Ben Brantley

If it is possible to leer sweetly, then that's what they're doing this weekend at City Center, where a likable if long-winded production of "Little Me" is running through Sunday. The Encores! concert revival of this 1962 musical manages to wipe the smirk off the face of a show about the rise and rise of a woman whose greatest assets are her mammary glands.

Her name? Belle Poitrine, a handle guaranteed to elicit snickers among those who have beginners' French under their belts. But as charmingly incarnated here by Rachel York, as the dewy younger version, and Judy Kaye, as the worldly older creature she becomes, Belle has a straight-ahead sincerity that makes her pretty much impervious to prurience.

The same, improbably enough, might be said of everyone and everything around her, including all the drooling men in Belle's life. These are mostly played with contagious good nature by Christian Borle, late of "Smash," the television series about a musical about another, famously well-endowed blonde, Marilyn Monroe. Broadway would seem to have a thing for peroxide and large cup sizes.

There, you see. It's hard to keep your mind out of the gutter, or at least the lingerie department, when discussing "Little Me," which features songs by Cy Coleman and Carolyn Leigh and a nouveau-Catskills script by a young wisecracker just beginning to make his name in the early 1960s, Neil Simon. But somehow, as staged by John Rando as the opener in what promises to be an especially juicy City Center Encores! season, "Little Me" often feels fresh and funny in ways that do not make you want to slap it.

Neither fabled flop nor template-making blockbuster, "Little Me" retains a special place in the heart of musical-comedy cultists, as one of those shows that surely deserved better that it got. The original version, which starred Sid Caesar and ran for a disappointing 257 performances, was probably a casualty of competition from two other cheerfully dirty-minded shows that year, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" and "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying."

You can see why Broadway aficionados refuse to give up on "Little Me." Its script, adapted from a novel by Patrick Dennis, is a spoof of the bogusly modest celebrity biography, a genre that has only multiplied on American best-seller lists. And the Coleman and Leigh songs exude a brassy verve, equal parts cynicism and sentimentality, that has guaranteed their enduring afterlife in cabarets.

But the show also always suffered from an identity crisis, a condition that became evident whenever anyone tried to revive it. As Mr. Simon wrote it, "Little Me" was essentially a showcase for the comic versatility — or at least indefatigability — of Mr. Caesar.

A borscht belt-bred comedian (and onetime boss of Mr. Simon's), whose blackout-sketch shows hijacked American television audiences, Mr. Caesar appeared as a whopping eight of Belle's boys, from a French

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music-hall star and a sickly European prince to the boy from the right side of the tracks whom the lowly born Belle always, truly loved, at least as much as she was able.

So was "Little Me" too sketch-driven for the age of the organic musical? Was its pneumatic heroine, with her role divided between two actresses, too much of a walking punch line to hold our sympathy? A 1982 revival disastrously divided Mr. Caesar's roles between two stars, Victor Garber and James Coco. The 1998 Roundabout Theater Company version returned to the idea of a single actor (blessedly, it was Martin Short) but had both young and old Belle portrayed by one performer (an uncomfortable Faith Prince).

The Encores! incarnation goes back to the show's original form, if not its spirit. I wasn't around to see Mr. Caesar conquer in "Little Me," but I've caught enough of his television performances on video to imagine the sort of timing and chutzpah he must have brought to it. And I did see Mr. Short, another veteran of television sketch comedy, who gave a juggernaut performance.

Mr. Borle, who won a Tony playing the ineffectually villainous Black Stache in "Peter and the Starcatcher," has a looser, less aggressive comic presence. Mr. Short and (I presume) Mr. Caesar gave the impression of being perpetually coiled in readiness to pounce on whatever joke came their way. Mr. Borle has a more casual relationship with his material; he sidles up to caricature. And rather than smashing corny and vulgar shtick into the audience, he gives it a gentle, goofy topspin.

That sensibility shifts, or at least diffuses, the show's center. This "Little Me" makes Belle — both of her — as worthy of our attention as the slapstick-prone men who fall for her (in more ways than one). Though a cousin of the American musical's greatest gold digger, Lorelei Lee of "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," Belle isn't nearly as complete or endearing a comic portrait.

But Ms. Kaye, as the Belle who recounts her life to a pet biographer (David Garrison), authoritatively combines earthiness and stateliness. Ms. York inventively modulates the surface of a superficial part by investing it with the sheen of Joan Crawford, the movie star who embodied so many rags-to-riches fantasies on screen with her determined smile and ravenous eyes. (In the show's musical high point, its title song, these two Belles perform in gloriously knowing harmony.)

The supporting cast is so packed with veteran talent — including Harriet Harris (hilarious), Lee Wilkof, Lewis J. Stadlen and Tony Yazbeck (who does an athletically sexy rendition of the great, finger-snapping "I've Got Your Number)" — that you expect it to burst wide open. But Mr. Rando keeps scenery chewing to a minimum. And the show has an affable effortlessness as it snakes and swoops through the years of one woman's life.

With Rob Berman conducting, and Ralph Burns's original orchestrations lovingly reassembled, the Encores! Orchestra gives full due to the shiny layers of Coleman's diverse and peppy score. The corps de ballet, choreographed by Joshua Bergasse, dances, with varying results, in an ambitious variety of styles.

The show has been designed — by a team that includes John Lee Beatty (scenic consultant) and Ken Billington (lighting) — with a shorthand sumptuousness that uses giant picture postcards to signal changes of scene. But this "Little Me" feels less like a series of colorful postcards then one long, slightly meandering love letter to a comic sensibility that was beginning to go out of fashion even 50 years ago. As such, it's well worth adding to your scrapbook of musical memories.

#### NY Times

#### Little Me

Book by Neil Simon; lyrics by Carolyn Leigh; music by Cy Coleman; based on the novel by Patrick Dennis; directed by John Rando; choreography by Joshua Bergasse; sets by John Lee Beatty; costumes by Paul Tazewell; lighting by Ken Billington; sound by Scott Lehrer; concert adaptation by Jack Viertel; music coordinator, Seymour Red Press; original orchestrations by Ralph Burns; production stage manager, Jason Hindelang. Presented by New York City Center, Arlene Shuler, president; Mr. Viertel, artistic director; Mark Litvin, managing director; Rob Berman, music director. At the City Center, 131 West 55th Street, Manhattan; 212-581-1212, nycitycenter.org. Through Sunday. Running time: 2 hours 40 minutes.

WITH: Christian Borle (Noble Eggelston/Amos Pinchley/Val du Val/Fred Poitrine/Otto Schnitzler/Prince Cherney/Noble, Junior), Robert Creighton (Pinchley, Junior/Defense Lawyer/Preacher/German Soldier/General/Captain/Assistant Director/Yulnick), David Garrison (Patrick Dennis), Harriet Harris (Mrs. Eggelston), Judy Kaye (Miss Poitrine, today/Older Belle), Lewis J. Stadlen (Doctor), Lee Wilkof (Bernie Buchsbaum), Tony Yazbeck (George Musgrove) and Rachel York (Belle/Young Belle/Baby Belle).

NY Times

February 6, 2014

### First the Doughnuts, Then the Debates 'Beertown' Requires Audience Participation

By Ken Jaworowski

A shout-out to whoever brought the brownies to "Beertown." They were tasty, as were the butter cookies. I didn't try the powdered doughnuts or the cake — I was busy getting my souvenir T-shirt — though they looked a bit too sweet.

Indeed, there's so much sweetness in this work at 59E59 Theaters — from the table of treats to the cheery song you'll be asked to sing — that you may feel queasy from all the sugar.

"Beertown" opens with a potluck dessert, for which theatergoers are encouraged to bring and share food. It's integral to the story: Everyone is here to attend the 20th Quinquennial Beertown Time Capsule Day Ceremony. From the capsule, artifacts will be removed and displayed, and new items will be debated and voted on for inclusion when it's resealed. Before you vote, you'll stand to give the Pledge of Allegiance and to sing the Beertown Hymn.

Billed as an "interactive exploration of history, civic ritual, identity, community and memory" that's built on an "audience integration" principle, "Beertown" is exceedingly good-hearted, avoiding the snark that could infect its portrayal of small-town life. As residents speak their piece, they radiate friendliness. This is a combination of "Our Town" and a Christopher Guest film, with a large measure of performance art.

Still, there's a thin line between charming and trite, one that's crossed often here. This meeting has slowmoving stretches, and on the night I attended, the cast wasn't especially sharp at improvisation. (The play claims to be about 40 percent unscripted.) The best material came from audience members, who were keen to speak up during the debates.

That's one of the points, of course: We seek to create communities and participate. Yet it needn't take over two hours to illustrate this and other simple ideas, using scenes that are at times overly eager to force their thesis.

With a genial mayor (Wyckham Avery, very believable) and her nerdy daughter (Rachel Grossman, just as good), "Beertown" depends entirely on your tolerance for folksy characters and skits that detail a fictional area's quirky lore.

If nothing else, I can recommend the brownies.

"Beertown" continues through Feb. 16 at 59E59 Theaters, 59 East 59th Street, Manhattan; 212-279-4200, 59e59.org.



## The New York Times

February 6, 2014

### **Correcting the Film Version of a Sensational Story** 'Riding the Midnight Express With Billy Hayes,' at St. Luke's

By Andy Webster

There is intrinsic power in escape stories; consider films like "Papillon" or "Escape From Alcatraz." With "Riding the Midnight Express With Billy Hayes," the writer Billy Hayes tells his own. It's been presented before: in "Midnight Express," his 1976 memoir about five years he spent imprisoned in Turkey for trying to smuggle hashish, and in the 1978 movie adaptation. But as he makes clear in this one-man show, the movie omits much of his ordeal, and what it does present has, shall we say, a high degree of historical revisionism.

By 1970, Mr. Hayes at 23 had thrice carried hashish to America from Turkey, before that country cracked down on airport security to demonstrate to the Nixon administration its commitment to the war on drugs. Arrested while boarding a plane with two kilograms, Mr. Hayes was convicted and imprisoned. When his sentence was later increased to 30 years, he resolved to free himself.

Oliver Stone's Oscar-winning but overheated, dated and xenophobic script for the movie took liberties. Mr. Hayes never accidentally killed a prison guard, and, unlike his character in the movie, he did have a brief, physically intimate relationship with another inmate. Most important, Mr. Hayes says, he never delivered the blistering anti-Turkish speech in court that is a centerpiece of the film. The movie also completely ignores his transfer to an island prison, and his overnight row in a stolen dinghy across a stormy sea to shore and his trek on land to Greece and freedom. (That passage is a show highlight.)

Mr. Hayes — slender, gray-haired and physically fit — is an ingratiating presence, something that was even more apparent in his brief talk with the audience after the performance. Raised in Long Island, he now lives in Los Angeles but retains a mild New York accent. At times, his delivery, as directed by John Gould Rubin, could stand to slow down, to enable the audience to better savor his engrossing tale. But his sincerity — about his drug experience and affection for Turkish culture — is appealing, and his desperate journey to Greece is stirring.

"Riding the Midnight Express With Billy Hayes" continues through March 23 at St. Luke's Theater, 308 West 46th Street, Clinton; 212-239-6200, telecharge.com.



February 6-February 12, 2014

### Best lives up to his name in 'Long Distance Runner'

#### By LAPACAZO SANDOVAL Special to the AmNews

Even if, God forbid, you were deaf, mute and blind, you could still acknowledge that Sheldon Best is a superlative artist and will—if he duplicates a marathon runner's pace and steely determination—achieve a career that will richly reward him. He's got that magical "something" that turns a first glance into a serious gaze.

Currently, Best is starring in the Atlantic Theater Company's new stage adaptation of "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner." In this play, which is based on Alan Sillietoe's original 1959 short play that was adapted for film in 1962 and has been reimagined by British playwright Roy Williams, the Atlantic Theater company does what they do best—take risks and springboard new and exciting talent.

Set in the early 1970s, the taunt drama centers on racial tension in class-obsessed London, a world that young Colin, an angry and aimless youth with a yearning for long-distance running, reluctantly calls home. He's short on ambition and long on seething resentment. That aimless energy finds him imprisoned, but everything bad falls away when Colin is running. Coerced by the prison warden to enter a race against a posh school, Colin is allowed free time to train outside the prison walls. He pushes his body to go forward, funneling his jagged disappointment into each stride. If Colin could switch heaven for an unending running path, he would blissfully enjoy being in eternal, perpetual motion.

Best gives an intelligent performance. His performance both scared me and comforted me. The show closes on Feb. 9,



Sheldon Best in "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner" (Ahron Foster photo)

and I strongly suggest you witness Best's eye-opening performance. Some of his credits include the Classical Theatre of Harlem's "A Midsummer Nights Dream" and Ma-Yi Theater Company and the Vampire Cowboys' "Soul Samurai." Geek!

Here's what Best had to share about his spot-on London accent and why he loves Brooklyn.

#### AmNews: Sheldon, where is that dangerously sexy Brit accent? OMG, you're not British?!

Best: (Slipping into the missing accent) I'm not? My parents are from the islands [Jamaica and Barbados]. I was raised in Brooklyn. The Brit accent is loosely formed from all of the cultural influences that have shaped London. I also get to speak Patois in the play. My Spanish is decent, along with my French.

Wicked. How did you convince the director, Leah C. Gardiner, to trust—and pardon me for this—a"Yankee" for this essentially British role?

I went on a campaign to acquire the role, which drove my agent nuts. I'm a fan of the Atlantic Theater Company, so I immersed myself. When the au-



dition finally materialized, I was ready to accept the challenge.

You're running for most of the play. How long have you been a long-distance runner? I'm not a marathon runner.

Not British and not a runner, Your body is ripped and slender. Nike said "just do it" and you obeyed.

(laughing) I enjoy roles that demand key physical acts from my character. I've played a boxer on stage, and now I'm a long-distance runner. Next I hope will be an action-adventure film that pushes me even more.

### What do you love about our city?

The diversity that changes from subway stop to subway stop. Each borough has its own sound, smell and other world feeling. Brooklyn is home to me.

### Brooklyn rocks. Where's your favorite place to eat and recharge?

Definitely inside my mother's kitchen. All of my big decisions have been made over her homemade Jamaican stew peas with dumplings.

The U.S. premiere of "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner" is playing at Atlantic Stage 2, located at 330 W. 16th-St., until Feb. 9.





Groff, Mueller, more set for 'Backwards' This year's roster of actors in "Broadway Backwards," the charity concert where Broadway songs are performed in a same-sex context, will include Jonathan Groff, Jessie Mueller, Bryan Batt and Stephanie J. Block. The concert will take place on March 24 at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre.

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