

Wicked

Book by Winnie Holzman. Music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz. Dir. Joe Mantello. With Stephanie J. Block, Kendra Kassebaum, Carol Kane, David Garrison. Ford Center for the Performing Arts, Oriental Theatre (see Touring shows).

Before you can surrender to the merits of *Wicked*, you have to weigh them against the show's many dilemmas. The touring Broadway behemoth, which will blow any 13-year-old's mind, any parent's pocketbook and the budget of any other Chicago show in recent memory out of the water, is full of contradictions. Gregory Maguire's vibrantly creative Oz prequel story about Glinda and the



GIRL IN THE PLASTIC BUBBLE Good witch Kassebaum proves hope floats.

Wicked Witch of the West is adapted for the stage almost completely witlessly by Holzman (a pun about an escaped land beast—"the goat is on the lam"—is about as brightly as it shines). It's a musical about the beauty of individuality, and yet Schwartz's SPAM-y power ballad score is pretty much indistinguishable from most other Broadway shows in the same family, veering into pan-bland Celine Dion territory. Even more chilling is that this political allegory about the danger of pandering to the masses (the Wizard, it turns out, is something of a spin doctor) plays to a common denominator lower than the Red Line stop in front of the Oriental Theatre.

But to its credit, Mantello's production occasionally winks at us, indicating it knows all these things about itself. And then it defies us to naysay it by offering a few moments of paralyzing theatricality no other show could achieve. Indeed, the foremost example of this defiance is the Act I finale—not coincidentally called "Defying Gravity"—in which the not-yet-wicked Elphaba soars into the air and declares herself a fabulous matriarchal martyr. As the exceptional Block (she stands way out in an otherwise serviceable touring company) belts the show's one genuinely blood-pumping number, it's thrilling as hell. If this is what it takes to inspire a generation of young theatergoers (I can't imagine how it couldn't), then it's wonderful to have it here.—CP

Suburban Motel

By George F. Walker. Dirs. Marc Grapey and David Cromer. With ensemble casts. Famous Door Theatre at Victory Gardens Theatre (see Resident theaters).

One character asks another if he's "a fucked-up pathetic individual with a bleak past and almost no potential." That phrase neatly sums up everybody in these two black comedies from Walker's six-play collection, *Suburban Motel*, which is all set in the same motel room. In *Adult Entertainment*, a jaded defense attorney has an affair with a jaded cop and sets up a scheme that the cop's drunken partner botches—to comically deadly results. More of life's detritus surfaces in *Criminal Genius*. Small-time crooks screw up their assignment to burn down their boss's rival restaurant, instead kidnapping the rival chef, who happens to be the boss's daughter—again to comically deadly results.

The not-so-quiet desperation of these hit-bottom losers brings to mind *Fargo*, but without the danger. Yet the Coen brothers' film skillfully nails what's missing here: a sense that these outlandish characters fully occupy their absurdity. Without the impression that we're watching people who treat their laughable ridiculousness seriously, we feel that both we and the actors are outside and never sucked in. Sarah Charipar, as the alchy cop's estranged wife, and Karol Kent, as the petty criminals' leader, seem fully



STRANGE BEDFELLOWS Karol Kent, Scott Rutherford and Dan Rivkin get ready to check out.

trapped inside their miserable characters. And of the two directors, Cromer comes closer to getting *Criminal Genius*'s more screwball tenor.

Dark humor is tougher to pull off than it might seem. It's easier to milk the cheap yuks (something Steve Walker does fairly well in *Adult Entertainment*) than to express laughter's grim underside. Minus that, black comedy just becomes a fuzzy charcoal.—NovidParsi



POP TARTAN Joel Hatch (center) watches as Amy J. Ludwigsen and Jonathan Raviv go in for the kilt.

Brigadoon

Book and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner. Music by Frederick Loewe. Dir. Joe Leonardo. With Sean Allen Krill, Abby Mueller, Nancy Voigts, Sean Fortunato. Marriott Theatre (see Resident theaters).

If it weren't so tuneful, it would make a perfectly legitimate episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Two American travelers get lost in the Scottish highlands. They stumble across Brigadoon, a quaint village with a mysterious secret: Not unlike the Hotel California, you can check in any time you like, but you can never leave. This is a problem for American Tommy Albright (Krill), who falls in love with Brigadoonian Fiona MacLaren (Mueller). Will Tommy forswear 20th-century New York for the enchanted charms of an eternal Scottish village? Will the town escape destruction at the hands of a jilted lover? Will the audience endure not one but two rapid-fire patter songs?

Yes, yes and yes. And it's a fun ride, to boot. Director Leonardo provides a crisply paced, aptly cast rendition of this Lerner and Loewe chestnut. As Fiona, Mueller makes a strong showing, her bell-like soprano offset by a refreshing earthiness. Krill matches her vocally ("There But for You" is glorious), but his characterization is not as compelling; he's just a smidge too laid-back and glib.

In fact, it's odd that with such strong leads, it takes awhile for the sparks to really fly, but that may be the fault of the small in-the-round Marriott stage, which fences in epic passion. Dance numbers sometimes seem cramped, and with the actors contorting constantly to play to all four sides, emotional intensity is easily lost. Still, this *Brigadoon* offers a pleasant evening of old-fashioned entertainment.—Kay Daly

Remembering the Future

By Alexander Holt. Dir. Weil Richmond. With Ryan Colwell. The Narcissists at Breadline Theatre Laboratory (see Fringe & storefronts).

Teddy, a cocky playboy trader, just found out he has an unexpected kid on the way. A young woman named Monica is addicted to liquor, coke and anonymous sex. Alberto's obsessed with sex, too, imagining doing it with every woman he sees but never following through. Delores is afraid of becoming her mother. William might be a serial killer.

Each character in Holt's collection of ten monologues (Colwell performs them all) is on the edge in his or her own way. The idea seems to be that these people, all at rock bottom, are being genuinely honest, both with us and with themselves; Holt has turned off their internal filters. Unfortunately, the extreme situations they're placed in make everything seem less than genuine. Holt seems to have hit a pitfall common to young playwrights fresh out of college, in which darkness and shock value are mistaken for dramatic tension. Not everyone can be Neil LaBute (LaBute himself can only manage it about half the time). *Future's* roster includes two murderers, multiple drunks, a few coke addicts, an attempted suicide and a necrophiliac psychopath. It's hard for us to find much to relate to there. But despite the limitations, Colwell earns points for drawing each character distinctly, with vocal and physical traits that are specific but never artificial. He's a compelling performer: very funny in the lighter pieces, and truly haunting in some of the darker scenes. It's too bad his subjects are all such implausible losers.—Kris Vire

Seats for a song

Discount tickets are available for same-day and advance performances through **Hot Tix**, in the Loop at 78 W Randolph St. Hours are Tue–Fri 8:30am–6pm, Sat 10am–5pm and Sun noon–5pm. Other Hot Tix locations: the Water Works Visitor Center, 163 E Pearson St (Tue–Fri 10am–6pm, Sat 10am–5pm and Sun noon–5pm); North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, 9501 Skokie Blvd in Skokie (same hours as Water Works); plus all four Chicago Tower Records locations. Hot Tix is a service provided by the League of Chicago Theatres.

Student rush tickets—discounted tickets available at the box office one hour before performance—are available when noted, with student ID.