

People & Places

Theater

Offstage dramas

'Kill' beat the odds to deliver B'way smash

By Brent Lang

Jeff Daniels slumps into a chair in the Shubert Theatre, grasping an oversized Starbucks and looking bone-crushingly exhausted. His eyelids are heavy, and he seems like a man in desperate need of rest.

It's easy to understand why. It's late March, and Daniels has just given his 100th Broadway performance as Atticus Finch, the small-town attorney immortalized in Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" and in the 1962 Oscar-winning film of the same name. That's in addition to the 45 preview performances that Daniels and the cast spent fine-tuning playwright Aaron Sorkin's radical adaptation of the book that was published nearly 60 years ago. Not to mention the three workshops that took place before the show ever made it to Broadway. But Daniels, who is in the third month of a yearlong commitment, won't be getting a break anytime soon.

"I don't want to miss a show," he tells Variety. "They came to me a few weeks ago to see when I wanted to take a vacation this summer, and I asked if they were selling tickets. They go, 'Oh yeah, they're going out the door.' And I'm thinking people are paying how much for these seats? I'm not going to announce that I'm leaving for two weeks in July."

Indeed, since opening on Dec 13, "To Kill a Mockingbird" has been selling tickets at a record-escalating clip. It has become the highest-grossing American play in history, in 18 weeks racking up cumulative sales to date of more than \$70 million, and easily recouping its \$8 million initial capitalization as well as its running costs. A national tour has been announced, and producer Scott Rudin is planning a London engagement.



Daniels

Hit

"Plays, even hit plays, don't usually perform like this," says Rudin. "I knew the book was still taught everywhere and that it's embedded in people's hearts and minds, but even in my most outrageous fantasies I had no idea we would be so successful."

The ride to the top wasn't a smooth one. Since Rudin first announced plans to bring "To Kill a Mockingbird" to Broadway, a series of offstage dramas have threatened to derail or overshadow the play. It's a show that has had to contend with a legal fight with Harper Lee's estate, a stunning awards-season snub and negative headlines resulting from its standoff with community theaters who were mounting their own productions of an earlier stage adaptation of the novel.

"When we were having all these problems, I just said to myself, 'You know what? I'm going to trust in Scott Rudin,'" says LaTanya Richardson Jackson, who plays the Finch family's housekeeper, Calpurnia. "They're on the same level."

The production's success is all the more surprising because this is not the "To Kill a Mockingbird" you probably remember from middle school. Whereas Lee's novel read like a magnolia-scented coming-of-age tale that serves up a portrait of good and evil that is easily digestible to teenagers, Sorkin re-imagines the story in a way that presents a more ambiguous moral victory. His Atticus isn't carved out of rectitudinous granite. He's a flawed man, a lousy criminal defense attorney and a parent who may be guilty of articulating a reductive view of right and wrong to his children, Jem and Scout.

Packs

At a time when audiences seem to prefer escapism fare, "To Kill a Mockingbird" packs a wallop with its look at a black man condemned to death by a bigoted criminal justice system. Lee wrote her novel in the midst of the civil rights movement, drawing on her childhood experiences in Depression-era Alabama. Subsequent generations of readers may have been tempted to think that the portrait of Jim Crow racism that she painted existed in some distant, long-ago past. In recent years, this comforting belief has been challenged. Hate crimes are on the rise, unarmed black men are gunned down by police and the president expresses sympathy with white supremacist rioters. That makes "To Kill a Mockingbird" more timely and urgent than it's been in decades.

"It's a stronger punch to the chin," says Daniels. "With Trump and the America we're watching happen right before our eyes, people are just awake to it now. White America has a decision to make. They have to make a decision about which side they're on."

"To Kill a Mockingbird" is also a commercial phenomenon that defies the usual makeup of a blockbuster show. Broadway is dominated by upbeat musical versions of hit films like "Beetlejuice" and "Frozen," and big-budget plays like "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child" that deploy elaborate special effects to dazzle audiences. With the possible exception of "Hamilton", with its revolutionary reinterpretation of the Founding Fathers, most of the shows that top box office charts aren't terribly interested in grappling with knotty ideas. And yet "To Kill a Mockingbird", which bravely asks whether, in a racist society, the arc of the moral universe truly bends toward justice, seems to be filling a need.

"We're providing a space for 1,400 people to come together and process some big questions about the country," says Gideon Glick, who portrays Scout and Jem's friend Dill. "There aren't a lot of places to do that right now. Off Broadway you expect to see this kind of play, but it's very rare for it to exist on Broadway."

Given the torrid ticket sales and strong reviews, awards watchers were shocked when "To Kill a Mockingbird" failed to score a Tony Award nomination for best play. It did net nine nominations, tying with "The Ferryman" for the most of any play, and picked up nods for Daniels, director Bartlett Sher and Celia Keenan-Bolger, who plays Scout. Despite the impressive tally, the best play snub hurt.

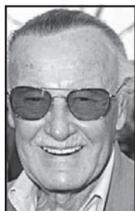
"You know what was so hard for me about that?" says Keenan-Bolger. "I mean, many things. But I think coming into that building and understanding how hard so many people worked on that play — that when you get a best play nomination, it belongs to everyone. And I feel like instead, [the Tony Awards were] so supportive of all the individuals, but I yearned for everybody who worked so hard to have something that they felt like they could claim themselves." (RTRS)



Neil Young performs at the BottleRock Napa Valley Music Festival at Napa Valley Expo in Napa, California. (AP)



Pharrell Williams performs at the BottleRock Napa Valley Music Festival at Napa Valley Expo in Napa, Calif. (AP)



Lee



Morgan

Variety

LOS ANGELES: Stan Lee's former business manager, Keya Morgan, was arrested in Arizona Saturday morning on an outstanding warrant from the Los Angeles Police Department.

The LAPD's Mike Lopez confirmed that the arrest warrant was for the following charges: one count of false imprisonment — elder adult; three counts of grand theft from elder or dependent adult, special aggravated white collar crime loss of over \$100k; and one count of elder or dependent adult abuse. The investigation into whether Stan Lee was the subject of elder abuse began in March 2018 stemming from actions allegedly taken by Morgan in May and June of 2018.

The grand theft charges stem from \$262,000 that was collected from autograph signing sessions in May 2018, but that Lee never received.

The police say the false imprisonment charge stems from Morgan's removal of Lee from his Hollywood Hills home to a secured condo in Beverly Hills in early June 2018. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Moby has issued an apology of sorts after writing in his recently published memoir "Then It Fell Apart" that he dated Natalie Portman when she was 20 — a claim the actress refuted.

"As some time has passed I've realized that many of the criticisms leveled at me regarding my inclusion of Natalie in Then It Fell Apart are very valid," he wrote in an Instagram caption alongside a shot of the text "from moby, an apology". "I also fully recognize that it was truly inconsiderate of me to not let her know about her inclusion in the book beforehand, and equally inconsiderate for me to not fully respect her reaction."

In his book, Moby had characterized their relationship as dating. Portman, however, had a different recollection — and said she was only 18 at the time.

"I was surprised to hear that he characterized the very short time that I knew him as 'dating' because my recollection is a much older man being creepy with me when I just had graduated high school," she said in a recent interview for the website of British Harper's Bazaar. "He used this story to sell

Music

Waterboys do musical archaeology

Earle sings blues on new album

By Steven Wine

Justin Townes Earle, "The Saint of Lost Causes" (New West)

Justin Townes Earle is feeling bad, and his music has never been better.

On "The Saint of Lost Causes", Earle inhabits a range of doleful, downcast characters who span our troubled land, from the cop killer on "Appalachian Nightmare" to the teen trying to escape bleak circumstances on "Over Alameda".

There's also considerable range to the music, but it all comes from the same wellspring. Earle does country blues ("Don't Drink the Water"), jump blues ("Flint City Shake It"), a blues shuffle ("Ain't Got No Money") and 12-resto swing ("Pacific Northwestern Blues").

The titles tell the tale, and there's pain from start (the title cut) to finish (the lonely lament "Talking to Myself"). But not everything is a downer — "Mornings in Memphis" finds beauty in the moment, and "Say Baby" is a spirited two-chord come-on.

Earle's backstory includes a nomadic youth, delinquency and addiction, and he convincingly fills the roles he has created. He's in fine voice, with a mix of verve and vulnerability and the phrasing of a great storyteller. The excellent supporting cast is led by bassist Adam Bednarik, who co-produced with Earle, and guitarist Joe V. McMahan.

The state of the union is not pretty, but it has inspired Earle's best album.

The Waterboys, "Where the Action Is" (Cooking Vinyl)

The liner notes to the Waterboys' latest album credit frontman Mike Scott for vocals, guitar, keyboards, bass — and "archaeology". And "Where the Action Is" does indeed offer an entertaining survey of music history in 10 songs.

The title track, which opens the album, is a bracing cover of Robert Parker's 1960s soul gem with updated

lyrics. "You can fool the whole world with just one tweet," Scott sings. The next cut advances the focus a decade with "London Mick", a rollicking autobiographical tribute to the Clash's Mick Jones.

There are swinging salutes to R&B, and mashups bridging genres and generations. Scott pairs hip-hop verses with a Beatles-style chorus on the sunny "Take Me There I Will Follow You", and he puts 18th century lyrics to a 21st century rhythm track on "Then She Made the Lasses O".

Most ambitious is the closing "Piper at the Gates of Dawn", inspired by Kenneth Grahame's 1908 novel "The Wind in the Willows". For nearly nine minutes Scott speaks over a simple piano pattern as he describes an enchanting vision. It's Scottish folk reminiscent of the Waterboys' wonderful 2011 album, "An Appointment With Mr Yeats".

On "Where the Action Is", the best archaeology is self-referential.

Also:

LOS ANGELES: In the seven years since Whitney Houston's death, there has been relatively little of the asset-exploitation that usually follows the passing of a music icon, apart from a smattering of previously unreleased recordings, a pair of harrowing documentaries and a lot of unflattering press.

But according to an article in the New York Times, the estate is now "open for business," according to executor Pat Houston, and has pacted a deal with publishing/management company Primary Wave for a hologram tour, an album of unreleased material, a musical and more. According to the report, Primary Wave will acquire 50 percent of the estate's assets — including the singer's royalties from music and film, merchandising, and the right to exploit her name and likeness — in a deal that values the estate at \$14 million.

"It's been quite emotional for the

past seven years," said Pat Houston, Whitney's sister-in-law and former manager. "But now it's about being strategic."

First up is the hologram tour, which will feature the late singer's image accompanied by her original backing band, including Whitney's brother (and Pat Houston's husband) Gary. Pat Houston, who managed Whitney's career from the early 2000s, is the estate's sole executor, with the singer's brothers, Gary and TK, and mother Cissy as the beneficiaries. Also in the works are an album containing outtakes from her 1985 debut album, a Broadway musical and a "Vegas-style spectacle". For the present, however, "The hologram has taken precedence over everything," she said.

Pat stressed that despite the personal chaos depicted in the documentaries and the tabloid press, Whitney was not struggling financially at the time of her death. "She had money when she died," Pat Houston said. "It wasn't multimillions, like everyone thought, but she wasn't broke."

Primary Wave has moved aggressively into the catalog business since its founding in 2006, and works with assets from Smokey Robinson, Bob Marley, Def Leppard and Kenny Loggins. And despite the controversy that has surrounded hologram tours featuring deceased icons — which include Amy Winehouse, Frank Zappa, Ronnie James Dio and many others — Pat Houston says the effort is about reclaiming Whitney's legacy. The singer's final decade was marred by substance abuse, discord surrounding her troubled marriage to singer Bobby Brown, and subpar albums and concert performances.

"Before she passed, there was so much negativity around the name; it wasn't about the music anymore," Pat Houston said. "People had forgotten how great she was. They let all the personal things about her life outweigh why they fell in love with her in the first place." (Agencies)

his book was very disturbing to me," she continued. "I was a fan and went to one of his shows when I had just graduated. We only hung out a handful of times before I

realized that this was an older man who was interested in me in a way that felt inappropriate."

Moby had responded to the controversy

on Instagram Wednesday, sharing what he claimed was "corroborating photo evidence" of their "brief, innocent and consensual romantic involvement." (RTRS)



Actor Michael Fassbender, actress Sophie Turner, director Simon Kinberg, actor Tye Sheridan and actor Evan Peters (from left to right), pose for the media ahead of the press conference for their new movie "X-Men: Dark Phoenix" in Seoul, South Korea on May 27. The movie is to be released in South Korea on June 5. (AP)

LOS ANGELES: To promote next month's premiere of "Black Mirror" Season 5, Netflix is launching a short video series — "Little Black Mirror", with a cast that includes an ensemble of Latinx social-media stars.

The three "mini-stories", aimed at Spanish-speaking audiences, are inspired by the tech-dystopian universe of Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones' anthology series.

"Little Black Mirror" stars Maia Mitchell ("The Fosters"), "The Last Summer", Rudy Mancuso, Juana Zurita, Lele Pons, Anwar Jibawi, Hannah Stocking, Jeff Wittek, Delaney Glazer and Alesso. For the promotional video series, Netflix reached out to popular YouTube personalities from across Latin America, including Mexico, Colombia, Brazil and Venezuela to create their own takes on "Black Mirror".

The trio of "Little Black Mirror" episodes will be released on YouTube on May 26, June 2 and June 6, on the Netflix America Latina channel.

The episodes were directed and scored by musician-actor Rudy Mancuso, who is managed by Shots Studios (which also manages digital influencers Pons, Alesso, Stocking and Jibawi). (RTRS)