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MUSIC

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



ARTS BEAT
Barry Bassis

Tromaville rocks: The Toxic Avenger musical

How many jokes about New Jersey can you take? Judging by the funny, gross and rocking musical "The Toxic Avenger," the answer is quite a few.

Based on the 1984 cheapie horror-comedy film, it's the best of its genre since "Little Shop of Horrors." The locale is Tromaville, a New Jersey town where "if the pollution doesn't get you/ The aroma will." The nerdy Melvin (Nick Cordero) is thrown into a vat of muck by a pair of thugs, after which he becomes the title character, a monster capable of extreme violence but still in love with Sarah (Sara Chase), the blind blonde librarian.

The small cast switches roles with abandon: Matthew Saldívar and Demond Green are roughnecks, policemen and females, while the phenomenal Nancy Oppel plays a nun, Melvin's mother and the town's corrupt and sexy mayor. In one amazing scene, she portrays two of them carrying on a fight. Director John Rando ("Urinetown") knows how to make the gross goings-on funny and the rock score is by David Bryan (keyboardist and co-founder of New Jersey rockers Bon Jovi) with Joe DiPietro providing some of the lyrics as well as the book.

The show is recommended for those over 14 and should delight teenage boys, though girls might be turned off by the violence (arms wrenched out of their sockets).

At 90 minutes without intermission, "The Toxic

Avenger" (at New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St.; 212-239-6200) doesn't overstay its welcome.

Carlton Brown's compelling play "Pure Confidence," a Mixed Blood Theater production, sheds light on an obscure part of our history. Many of the top jockeys in the pre-Civil War era were slaves; ironically, after liberation, blacks were excluded from the top races.

The title is the name of the champion horse Simon Cato (Gavin Lawrence) rides at the beginning of the play but it also refers to his feeling of superiority, which he freely expresses. Simon's plan is to earn enough money to buy his freedom. The play charts his complex (and often funny) relationship with the Colonel (Chris Mulkey), whose horses he rides to victory. Meanwhile, Cato romances Caroline (Regina Marie Williams), the slave/servant of the Colonel's wife, Mattie Johnson (Karen Landry).

The Colonel and his wife have affectionate relationships with Simon and Caroline, up to a point. The short second act of the play takes place after emancipation when Cato is reduced to a menial position of bellhop at a Saratoga hotel. The dialogue is often witty and Lawrence has a tour-de-force scene where he climbs atop a barrel to act out a horse race between Slavery and Freedom. The work, impeccably directed by Marion McClinton, forcefully demonstrates that history is neither white nor black. "Pure Confidence" is running until July 3 at 59 East 59th Street Theater.

EMI Classics' new record-

ing of "Madama Butterfly" is a rarity nowadays; a studio recording of an opera. This is an expensive undertaking and the label does not skimp on the personnel, technology or the packaging.

The title role is taken by perhaps the leading Puccini soprano on the scene, the Romanian soprano Angela Gheorghiu. A beauty and a riveting actress on stage, her artistry comes through in this double-CD set. In the opera, she makes the transition from an innocent 15-year old, bought and paid for by the cynical American naval officer Pinkerton, to an 18-year-old mother who commits suicide.

Butterfly is the most tragic of Puccini's heroines and he managed to come up with ravishing melodies as his protagonists sped on their way to death by tuberculosis ("La Bohème") or leaping off a parapet ("Tosca"). As Pinkerton, the set has the acclaimed German tenor Jonas Kaufmann. He has a large voice with a baritone hue. My own preference is for a brighter sound (such as Björlering) but Kaufmann clearly thinks about the words.

If he is not the most likeable of Pinkertons, it should be remembered that the role is that of a cad. The sexual exploitation of Asian children by western tourists is still a terrible problem and Puccini's opera, with its divine melodies and high drama, is still on the side of the angels. One area in which the recording clearly trumps the competition is Antonio Pappano's conducting of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, brilliantly captured by EMI's engineers. The packaging is superb, with the complete

libretto in four languages, an informative essay about the opera and photographs of the artists.

In sum, even if you have a favorite recording of the opera, you should still give this one a listen, especially if you're an admirer of Gheorghiu. Next season, she will be appearing at the Metropolitan Opera in "Carmen" with her husband, Roberto Alagna.

The first joke in Alan Ayckbourn's "The Norman Conquests" is the title. The three plays are not an epic history about the war between the English and the French. Rather, Norman is a randy assistant librarian and the plays do not follow sequentially from one to the other but deal with the same weekend in a single house.

"Table Manners" is set in the dining room, "Living Together" in the living room and you know where "Round and Round in the Garden" takes place. The basic plot is that Norman had planned to take his unmarried sister-in-law Annie on a weekend holiday. Her brother Reg and his overbearing wife Sarah arrive to care for Annie and Reg's ailing mother without knowing about Annie's plans. Further complicating the affair is the frequent appearance of Annie's thick-headed veterinarian-suitor Tom.

The combustible group is later joined by Norman's fiery wife Ruth. The six actors — Amelia Bullmore, Jessica Hynes, Stephen Mangan, Ben Miles, Paul Ritter and Amanda Root — have already garnered some best ensemble awards that they fully deserve. Director Matthew Warchus (who also directed "God of

Carnage") is clearly on a roll. Rob Howell's costumes and David Howe's lighting are also praiseworthy. While you can see just one or two, I caught all three and would gladly go back for more.

The plays are running at Circle in the Square (1633 Broadway at 50th Street; 212-239-6200).

"On the Other Shore: Steven Mark Kohn's American Folk Settings" (on Azica Records) is an unexpected pleasure since I am unfamiliar with the composer/arranger, the singer baritone Andrew Garland or the pianist Donna Loewy.

In fact, I don't even know many of the folk songs (such as "The Old Woman's Courtship," "The Bachelor's Lay," "The Farmer's Cursed Wife"). Some are not obscure ("Poor Wayfaring Stranger" and "Wanderin'"). These arrangements are praiseworthy, belonging on the same shelf as Benjamin Britten's folk song

adaptations and the singer naturally gets into the mood of each piece. "The Senator's Stump Speech" is a funny piece: Americana about politics and alcohol, two subjects that can leave a hangover. If you enjoy Thomas Hampson's explorations of American music, you will appreciate this collection.

Quinn Lennay was sensational in "The Heat is On," a musical bio of Rita Hayworth she put on at BB King's Blues Club (237 W. 42nd St.; (212) 997-4144; www.bbkingblues.com) several years ago. The stunning Lennay, a talented singer/dancer/actress, returns to the club on June 10 in a new production, "Gotta Get a Gimmick, Barlesque to Broadway," which deals with her own life. There will be 13 on-stage performers, including Jamie Jackson, who co-wrote the show with Lennay. As Hayworth, Lennay wore five gowns; this time she may take them off on stage.

'Suor Angelica' at Chelsea Opera

Celebrating its fifth year, Chelsea Opera, co-founded by Stuyvesant resident Lynne Hayden-Findlay and business partner Leonarda Priore, presents Giacomo Puccini's "Suor Angelica" with the Chelsea Opera Chamber Orchestra at St. Peter's Church in Chelsea, 346 West 20th Street, on June 4, 5 and 6 at 7:30 p.m. and on June 7 at 3:30 p.m. Sung in Italian, the opera will be fully staged and costumed. Preceding the opera will be a gala concert featuring women and men of the ensemble in a program exploring the power of women in opera, "Women Extraordinaire." Tickets purchased in advance for evening performances are \$35 (preferred seating), \$30 (general admission) and \$20 (seniors/students) or at the door \$45, \$40 and \$25. All Sunday matinee tickets are \$20 in advance (\$25 at the door). Tickets may be purchased online at www.chelseaopera.org or by calling 1-866-811-4111. This production is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. For more information or call (212) 260-1796.