

## Turning-30 Rock: "tick... tick... BOOM!", at the Harrison Hilltop Theatre through July 26

Written by Mike Schulz  
Monday, 20 July 2009 06:00

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This past Thursday, the Harrison Hilltop Theatre celebrated not only the debut of its latest stage offering - the Jonathan Larson musical *tick ... tick ... BOOM!* - but the first anniversary of the venue's opening. And both were celebrated in style, with pre-performance hors d'oeuvres, beer samples from the Great River Brewery, an unveiling of the new Harrison Hilltop logo, and the announcement of the company's 2009-10 season.

The show was also preceded with a few words from co-producers Tristan Tapscott and Chris Walljasper about the significant improvements, cosmetic and technical, made within the building's interior over the past year, and the upgrades have been commendable; what was once a perfectly acceptable stage space has morphed into an endlessly malleable, honest-to-goodness *theatre*. Allow me, then, to publicly thank Tapscott and Walljasper - and newly minted Harrison Hilltop co-producers James Bleecker and Steve Quartell - for the party, and congratulate them on their first-year success. And I look forward to hearing them speak at the company's *fifth*-anniversary celebration, when hopefully enough time will have elapsed, and they can perhaps explain how Thursday's *tick ... tick ... BOOM!* went so dramatically, almost shockingly, wrong.



To take some initial heat off director Tapscott, music director Walljasper, and the three-person cast of Adam Michael Lewis, Tracy Pelzer-Timm, and Michael Crowe, I should mention that Larson's pop/rock musical seems a really tough one to produce effectively ... at least at present. Written years before Larson's *Rent*, and re-worked by playwright David Auburn (following Larson's 1996 death) for its 2001 off-Broadway debut, *tick ... tick ... BOOM!* is, like *Rent*, currently experiencing an awkward-adolescent period; the show is too dated to be terribly relevant, and too modern to be *newly* relevant.

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Its premise finds Larson's alter ego (Lewis), on the eve of his 30th birthday, torn between his thus-far-unsuccessful career as a composer of musicals, and selling out for financial security - the road taken by his best friend, Michael (Crowe). With its *Rent*-lite hipster vibe and touching combination of poignancy and youthful narcissism, the show does boast some lovely, clever songs. But in the wake of

*Next to Normal*

and

*Passing Strange*,

to say nothing of

*Rent*

itself, it's hard to work up empathy for someone who whines (via first-person commentary) that Broadway producers "don't get" his rock-fueled style. And adding the lead's megalomania and incessant navel-gazing, the bohemian-slacker, artists-versus-the-suits attitudes that

*tick ... tick ... BOOM!*

espouses are

*so-o-o*

1990s that any production of the show, nowadays, faces an uphill struggle: Why, exactly, are we meant to

*care*

about this character?

Well, you won't find your answer with Harrison Hilltop's latest, because what you get in Lewis' Jonathan Larson isn't a person; it's an oddly assembled collection of tics and mannerisms and overly practiced stand-up-comic cadences - energetic, occasionally funny, and not believable for an instant. Earlier this year, portraying precisely detailed characters, Lewis was spectacular in productions of *The Mousetrap* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Here, though, this intensely gifted actor appears left completely to his own devices, and the strain is obvious; left with the vague task of playing "regular guy," Lewis attacks the part with such fanatical drive - working himself into apoplectic fits, screeching in mock outrage, bouncing like Tigger - that he doesn't seem

*human*. There's nothing to latch onto with this frenzied whirligig, and he subsequently comes across as fraudulent even when required to show "heart." Wind-up toys don't

*have*

a heart.



Was Tapscott, who has directed Lewis numerous times over the years, so awed by the actor's vigor in the role that he failed to notice how *inappropriate* it was? Didn't he recognize that Lewis and Crowe, who are wholly unconvincing as lifelong best friends, weren't making any kind of

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emotional connection with one another? (Crowe, for his part, displays a nicely relaxed ease - *too* relaxed, it turns out, as you can barely hear a word he says even when he's standing less than 10 feet away from you.) Didn't he realize that the beautiful, inventive Pelzer-Timm - who, in her role as Jonathan's unhappy girlfriend, clearly *is* trying to make a connection - was frequently left hanging? (At least she provided some wit in her brief comic turns as Jonathan's abrasive agent and a clueless advertising executive.)

And not to be indelicate, but weren't Tapscott and Walljasper aware of how poorly sung the show was? Each had fine moments, but I've seen all three *tick ... tick ... BOOM!* actors in other musicals, and have performed alongside Lewis hundreds of times in the past, and I *know* they're not as vocally shaky and glaringly off-key as Thursday's solos and harmonies oftentimes indicated. (During a few of the *really* awkward numbers, I found myself clenching my jaw and squeezing my hands into fists just so I could direct my discomfort elsewhere.) With the exceptions of Walljasper's and Jeff Stone's impressive, two-tiered set and Tapscott's expressive lighting designs, I thought Harrison Hilltop's new production was an almost total mess, and I pray that its flaws were restricted to opening night, or at the very least, opening weekend. Subsequent performances, after all, won't come with the added benefit of beer.

For tickets and information, call (309)235-1654 or visit [HarrisonHilltop.com](http://HarrisonHilltop.com) .