

WHEELS OF MISFORTUNE

The American dream goes south in three plays.

BY JOHN LAHR

Broadway is glutted these days with musical revivals, jukebox musicals, musical spectaculars—all nostalgic glances backward with no purchase on the present. These revivals don't know *how* to celebrate, because they don't know *what* to celebrate. The old triumphalist stuff of Broadway song—abundance, goodness, progress, romance, transcendence—doesn't play the way it used to. Irony, the sound of limitation, has become the culture's default position. The older generation, for whom the musical's sense of promise was both a credo and a backbeat, has laid waste the environment, sent the younger generation off to die in a phony war, and saddled it with eye-watering debt. This desolation, however, may have delivered to the young a rare new lyrical moment, one of those occasions when, in Tennessee Williams's words, "our hearts are uncovered and their voices released and that's when poetry comes and the deepest emotion."

Green Day's "American Idiot" (at the St. James), a theatrical reimagining of the punk band's 2004 album, which sold twelve million copies worldwide, does a sort of demolition job on Broadway-musical architecture. Like the 2006

Tony Award-winning show "Spring Awakening," it is an exciting example of the innovative director Michael Mayer's single-minded attempt to drag the musical into the twenty-first century. In telling the show's minimal story, Mayer, who co-wrote the book with Billie Joe Armstrong,

Green Day's lead singer and guitarist, aims for the same kind of swift narrative leaps that the songs make. Jumping between vivid, fragmentary moments, letting sensation substitute for psychology, "American Idiot" provides a dramatic experience that is akin to channel surfing. Out of the emotive bric-a-brac,



"American Idiot" offers a dramatic experience akin to channel surfing.

the audience constructs a backstory: three disaffected youths, Johnny (John Gallagher, Jr.), Will (Michael Esper), and Tunny (Stark Sands), decide to leave suburbia ("this hurricane of fucking lies") and go in search of themselves. Johnny finds drugs; Tunny finds himself in the military

and then an amputee; Will, who never actually leaves home, gets a girl pregnant and finds himself a couch potato. By the finale, all three are back in suburbia, having learned nothing and got nowhere. As they sing, early in the show, "This is how I'm supposed to be/In a land of make-believe/That don't believe in me."

Mayer has a strong, playful visual sense and a terrific working relationship with his scenic designer, Christine Jones. Together, they create a dynamic, brutalist playpen for the slacker heroes, which speaks as eloquently about anomie as the ear-splitting songs do. "Don't want to be an American idiot/One nation controlled by the media," the cast chants. High on the fumes of the culture's decay,

the kids snarl their alienation inside a kind of technology castle; forty-three television screens of different sizes blink oppressive imagery from towering walls. Fluorescence and adolescence agitate the air. Neither symmetry nor melody seems to exist. Green Day's sound is all rhythm and power chords, a thump of tribulation and terror that carries over into Steven Hoggett's choreography. Punching, kicking, elbowing, jerking their hunched bodies around the stage, the ensemble perform a semaphore of fright that resembles a syncopated Billy Blanks Tae Bo cardio workout.

With its extraordinary stage effects—scaffolding is transformed into a bus, a rubber tourniquet used for shooting up turns into a spider web that ensnares the addicts—"American Idiot" answers the digital age's requirements of speed, instant gratification, and accessibility. It is a rip-roar-

ing and original musical event. It has not, however, cracked the challenge of characterization. The show has personality, but its characters don't. On the night I saw it, Green Day made an impromptu post-show appearance onstage. "This is my first time on Broadway," Armstrong said,

impishly working the cheering crowd before the band launched into a few songs. Armstrong's compelling presence inadvertently demonstrated "American Idiot"'s narrative dilemma. His mischievous twinkle was the missing ingredient in the show's sensational nihilistic hubbub.

Mischief of a craven, fiduciary kind is the subject of Lucy Prebble's smart, inventive play "Enron" (directed by Rupert Goold, at the Broadhurst), which deconstructs the Texas corporation's 2001 bankruptcy; the largest in United States history at the time, it cost thousands of employees their jobs and life savings, and lost billions of dollars for investors. The show, which was one of the hits of the season in London last year, is better in its Broadway version, thanks primarily to the authenticity of American voices and to the spiky intelligence of Norbert Leo Butz, who plays Jeffrey Skilling, the driven, arrogant wunderkind who earned himself about a hundred million dollars and twenty-four years in prison by cooking the company's books. "I don't mind taking losses," Skilling tells his sidekick, Andy Fastow (Stephen Kunken). "But I can't *report* taking losses right now." Blinking behind his tortoiseshell glasses, Butz is a latter-day Sir Epicure Mammon, ravished by the three-card monte of trading without assets. "Enron *gets* virtual," he boasts. "We're changing people's lives, we're changing the world."

Goold, who is to my mind the finest young director in England, tells a complex economic tale with gleeful panache. Three blind mice make an appearance; raptors help to explain the shadow company set up by Enron to swallow its ever-increasing debt; the California energy crisis brought about by deregulation is dramatized with the choreographed ensemble wielding neon batons; Enron's rising stock prices are projected onto the sashaying bodies in red, blue, and yellow.

Prebble's tale of corporate chicanery is eerily up-to-the-minute. (Lehman Brothers even makes a comic cameo appearance.) Here, the greedy devil has not only the last word but the best one. Skilling stands before us in jailhouse orange, pointing at the blips in the Dow Jones Index over the past century. "This one gave us the railroads. This one the Internet. This one the slave trade. And if you wanna do anything about saving the

environment or reaching other worlds, you'll need a bubble for that too," he says. "Everything I've ever done in my life worth anything has been done in a bubble: in a state of extreme hope and trust and stupidity." Another American idiot.

If Prebble's Skilling sees himself as a master of the universe, Troy Maxson (Denzel Washington), the illiterate fifty-three-year-old garbage collector in the thrilling revival of August Wilson's 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, "Fences" (well directed by Kenny Leon, at the Cort), is on the opposite side of destiny's wheel. Maxson is one of the African-Americans whose heroic survival Wilson set out to chronicle in his ten-play Century Cycle: "left over from history," in Wilson's words, "a commodity of flesh and muscle which has lost its value in the market place."

Maxson is a tall talker. "I know you got some Uncle Remus in your blood," his friend Bono (the excellent Stephen McKinley Henderson) says. Maxson fills his Pittsburgh back yard with tales of the white man's oppression ("How come you got all whites driving and the coloreds lifting?") and of his own sexual exploits ("Legs don't mean nothing. You don't do nothing but push them out of the way. But them hips cushion the ride!"). Maxson's bravado is how he keeps his self-destructiveness at bay and makes space for himself in a world that constantly humiliates him. "Death ain't nothing but a fastball on the outside corner," Maxson, a legendary slugger, who learned the game in the penitentiary, where he did fifteen years for murder, says. Now, in 1957, on the back porch of his brick house, he fights an epic spiritual battle with racism, with disappointment, with the emotional legacy of his brutal sharecropper father, with loyalty to his wife, Rose (Viola Davis), and with envy at his offspring's accomplishments. His illegitimate son, Lyons (Russell Hornsby), is a jazz musician, but Maxson won't go to hear him play. "I don't like that Chinese music," he explains. Cory (Chris Chalk), his son with Rose, loses a football scholarship and a chance for higher education because Maxson won't sign the papers. "The white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway," he says. "The world's changing around you and you can't even see it," Rose tells her

husband, to no avail. He is fenced in by his rigidity and by the work ethic he learned at his cruel father's knee.

The volley of applause that meets Denzel Washington at curtain rise is for a star; the standing ovation he receives two hours and forty minutes later is for an actor. At once steely and funny, Washington is mesmerizing. In his luminous portrait, dignity and destructiveness find a perfect equipoise. Cory asks his brusque father why he's never liked him. "I ain't got to like you," Maxson says. "Mr. Rand don't give me my money come payday cause he likes me. He gives me cause he owe me. I done give you everything I had to give you. . . . And liking your black ass wasn't part of the bargain." Maxson can be as sweet as he is sour. When he turns his charm on his wife—Washington and Davis have a strong connection—the charge between them is palpable. "Well, go on back in the house and let me and Bono finish what we was talking about," he tells her, adding, "I got some talk for you later. You know what kind of talk I mean. You go on and powder it up."

Davis is every bit Washington's radiant equal onstage. Contained, almost demure, she exudes a staunch, no-nonsense quality that is pitch perfect for Rose, one of Wilson's most appealing female roles. Rose's affectionate reserve hides deep feeling, which is powerfully unleashed by Maxson's news that he's about to become a father again, with another woman. "I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom," she weeps, Davis's strong voice drawing out the poetry in Wilson's lines. "And it didn't take me no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn't never gonna bloom. But I held on to you, Troy. I held you tighter. You was my husband." She adds, "I gave everything I had to try and erase the doubt that you wasn't the finest man in the world."

At the dedication of the August Wilson Theatre, on Broadway, in 2005, the actor Charles Dutton reminded the A-team of black performers in the audience of the importance of staging first-rate revivals of Wilson's work to sustain his legacy. Washington and Davis heard the call. "Fences" is the finest revival of Wilson's work yet to be seen on Broadway—a deep, rich, resonant experience that makes an indisputable case for the play and for Wilson's enduring endeavor. I left the theatre full of gratitude. ♦