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NEW YORK, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1997

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FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1997

Weekend **MOVIES** **PERFORMING ARTS**

The New York Times

...and finding both the laughs in the show's ribald jokes and the sadness in the pauses between them, Mr. Plummer more than earned his Tony for this performance. The overall effect is fiendishly entertaining (1:45). Music Box, 239 West 45th Street, (212) 239-6200. Thursdays and Fridays at 8 P.M.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3 P.M. Tickets: \$25 to \$55 (Ben Brantley).

★ **"CHICAGO."** If Broadway bestowed medals for bravery, Marilu Henner should be among the honorees. Not only did she join "Chicago" in the role that had been played by Ann Reinking, whose links to the show by Bob Fosse, John Kander and Fred Ebb are at once artistic, emotional and historical. But she also signed on to play opposite Bebe Neuwirth, who has won both the Tony Award and the adoration of audiences as Velma Kelly, the convict with the heart of a gladiator and a body made for sheer black shifts. Ms. Henner is a fine Broadway-style singer and dancer, but what's missing at the moment in her portrayal of Roxie Hart is any trace of a rough edge. Her problem is magnified by the perfect-pitch performance of Ms. Neuwirth, an entertainer so comfortable in skin the color of angel food cake that she could tempt the devil. Overall, "Chicago" remains the smartest musical on Broadway, and the other remaining cast members are more potent than ever. Marcia Lewis's carnivorous Mama Morton, D. Sabela's florid Mary Sunshine and Joel Grey's wisp of an Amos all grow as time passes (2:30). Shubert, 225 West 44th Street, (212) 239-6200. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 P.M.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3. Tickets: \$20 to \$75; ticket availability for this weekend's performance is extremely limited (Peter Marks).

† **"A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM."** David Alan Grier, best known for his outrageous characters on the Fox Network program "In Living Color," has inherited the lead toga from Whoopi Goldberg in this vaudevillian sendup of Plautus, and he makes the part of Pseudolus his own. The idea of a black actor playing a musical-comedy slave, even a Roman one, might make some theatergoers uncomfortable, but the boyish Mr. Grier sidesteps racial politics with a few tension-breaking asides. In a sly reference to "Roots," he holds a doll aloft and adlibs, "I shall call you Kunta Kinte!" Occasionally the endless improvising makes it seem as if Mr. Grier was guest host of "Saturday Night Forum." At all times, however, his wholesome approach is fun; he's a Roman slave of the silliest possible variety (2:30). St. James, 246 West 44th Street, (212) 239-6200. Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 P.M.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2 and 8 P.M. Tickets: \$25 to \$75 (Marks).

† **"THE KING AND I."** No role in the musical theater, except perhaps that of Henry Higgins, is more burdened by the past than that of the King of Siam. Try as he might, any actor enunciating the line "et cetera, et cetera, et cetera" always ends up sounding like Yul Brynner. Kevin Gray, who has replaced Lou Diamond Phillips opposite the beguiling Faith Prince in this gilded pageant is no exception. The haircut may be different — it makes the King look like a hip suburban high school student — but the accent and the gestures suggest a royal lineage that leads directly back to the imperious Brynner. Mr. Gray opts for comedy over majesty in his contest with Ms. Prince's Anna; this is a ruler who has never



Paul O'Connor in "Atwater: Fixin' to Die."

Wunderkind: Bruce McIntosh in "Atwater: Fixin' to Die."

grown up. Ms. Prince brings charm and vulnerability to Anna; it's a performance of wonderful tact (2:45). Simon, 250 West 52d Street, (212) 307-4100. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 P.M.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3. Tickets: \$15 to \$75 (Marks).

★ **"LES MISÉRABLES."** A refurbished version of this Broadway warhorse was unveiled in March, and like a faded fresco lovingly restored, many of the show's original colors returned. With some intelligent recasting decisions, a sumptuous costume makeover and an infusion of vocal energy, the show has recovered from its near-death experience last fall, when Cameron Mackintosh, producer, and John Caird, co-director (with Trevor Nunn), removed half the cast and vowed to rehabilitate a production that had gone limp from creative exhaustion and neglect. Chief among the new assets are excellent cast additions that have resulted in geometric improvements in the production's balance and tone. All the principal roles, from Peter Lockyer's ardent Marius to Nick Wyman's dastardly Thénardier have been assumed by first-rate actors with the vocal assurance for the epic's rousing anthems. Still, as in the early days, you barely crack a smile in this stately musical's three hours of gorgeous harmony and pageantry (3:10). Imperial, 249 West 45th Street, (212) 239-6200. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 P.M.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3. Tickets: \$15 to \$75 (Marks).

★ **"RENT."** When "Rent" made its debut, its array of characters seemed types more than individuals. Now, 21 months later on Broadway, they're flesh-and-blood people, too. Time and some fortuitous recasting as some original members of the ensemble left appear to have strengthened the show's emotional foundation. Sherie Scott's Maureen provides comic relief and Michael McElroy's Tom Collins is an embracing presence who gives the work a conscience. His grief foreshadows the disintegration of the musical's central couple, Roger and Mimi, whose love story now has a true poignancy. As played by the incandescent Marcy Harriell, Mimi is a flirtatious hellcat whose need for Roger is nearly as addictive as her heroin habit. And Norbert Leo Butz as a new Roger (on Sunday nights; Adam Pascal

★ **"1776."** Darn it if this 26-year-old musical about, of all things, the Declaration of Independence doesn't prove itself to be a skilled seducer. It's like some facetious history nerd of a blind date you couldn't, at the evening's beginning, imagine enjoying yourself with. Yet by the end of three hours, you're amazed at how pleasurable the time has gone. The show, with music and lyrics by Sherman Edwards and book by Peter Stone, has been impeccably staged by Scott Ellis. It plays on shiny residual sentiments about the nation's beginnings with considerable ingenuity and even dramatic suspense. And the meticulously balanced ensemble, ably led by Brent Spiner as the agitating John Adams, does a fine job of conveying the irksome thrust and parry, and the compromise and counterplotting, that have always made American legislatures move (or just as often, not move) (3:00). Roundabout Theater Company, Stage Right, 1530 Broadway, at 45th Street, (212) 869-8400. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 P.M.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 2 P.M. Tickets: \$70; ages 17 and younger pay half price (Brantley).

† **"TITANIC."** At its best, this ambitious Tony Award winner (for best musical, among other things) is an admirably efficient piece of narrative, able to squeeze in a vast roster of characters, assorted chunks of technological and historical information, slews of statistics and themes ranging from class conflict to human hubris, all with minimal confusion. Yet the show, with songs by Maury Yeston and a book by Peter Stone, never seems to leave port. Under the guidance of the British director Richard Jones, with technically astonishing sets by Stewart Laing, "Titanic" fails to capitalize on the two obvious trump cards its subject has dealt it: sentimentality and suspense. It's a perversely cool work, cerebral without being particularly imaginative or insightful. Most often, it feels like a singing blueprint still waiting to achieve the third dimension (2:40). Lunt-Fontanne, 205 West 46th Street, (212) 307-4100. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 P.M.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3. Tickets: \$45 to \$75 (Brantley).

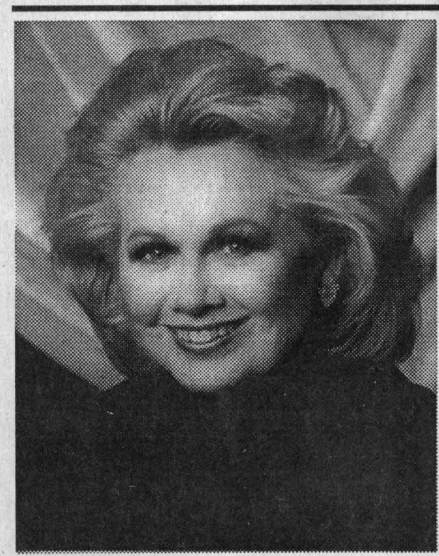
Off Broadway

★ **"AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN."** If you read the gossip columns, you'll know that this is the play whose divinely deceitful heroine has already captured the interest of Julia Roberts, Nicole Kidman and Madonna as a possible screen vehicle. But it's hard to imagine anyone topping J. Smith-Cameron as Alexa Vere de Vere, a glamorous seducer of the nearly famous, including a naive but corruptible young novelist (Bo Foxworth). Spouting more words per minute than anyone currently on a New York stage, Ms. Smith-Cameron brings a meticulous, fever-pitch interpretation (not to mention amazing breath control) to the role of a character who is, as she puts it, either an oasis or a mirage. And under Mark Brokaw's inventive, giddy direction, Douglas Carter Beane's soufflé of a satire emerges as a wryly confectionary, extremely entertaining fable for an age that always chooses image over substance (2:00). Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher Street, West Village, (212) 239-6200. Tuesdays through Fridays at 8 P.M.; Saturdays at 6 and 9 P.M.; Sundays at 3 and 7 P.M. Tickets: \$40 and \$45 (Brantley).

★ **"ATWATER: FIXIN' TO DIE."** Lee Atwater, the Republican campaign Wunderkind who died of a brain tumor in 1991 at the age of 40, may seem an unlikely subject for a form more often employed for towering historical figures and endearing tale-weavers. But the playwright Robert Myers submits just enough evidence in this solidly built, well-paced, 75-minute monodrama to make his persuasive dramatic case: Atwater's ascension as the symbolic occasion for the final burial of idealism in American politics. The spare production, directed with an admirable, even clinical austerity by George Furth, has the air of an inquest: What makes Lee run campaigns? Played with a chilling bonhomie by Bruce McIntosh, who bears more than a passing resemblance to him, Atwater is a twisted political prodigy of the modern era. The wiry Mr. McIntosh conveys both the naked ambition and folksy charm of a young man who advanced rapidly on an extraordinary instinct for the tastes, prejudices and resentments of white Middle America (1:15). 28th Street Theater, 120 West 28th Street, Chelsea, (212) 591-0019. Tuesdays through Fridays at 8 P.M.; Saturdays at 2 and 8 P.M. and Sundays at 3 and 7 P.M. Tickets: \$20 to \$25 (Marks).

★ **"GROSS INDECENCY: THE THREE TRIALS OF OSCAR WILDE."** Working with an all-male cast and a weighty archive of materials, the director Moisés Kaufman has shaped a sharply intelligent, dramatically fresh take on a subject that at least by the standards of Greenwich Village (home of the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop), would seem to have been exhausted. This is as much a multi-level study in public perceptions of class, art and sexuality as a portrait of one man's downfall, yet it retains the pull of the old-fashioned courtroom drama. Through the skillful arrangement of found materials, the production presents a world and a man struggling to define something (homosexuality in a social context) that was never before the topic of such widespread public discourse. As Wilde, Michael Emerson is stunning as he progresses from epigrammatic assurance to a public role for which, tragically, he is no longer writing the script (2:30). Minetta Lane, 18 Minetta Lane, off the Avenue of the Americas, Greenwich Village, (212) 420-8000. Tuesdays through Fridays at 8 P.M.; Saturdays at 2 and 8 and Sundays at 3 and 7. Tickets: \$29.50 to \$47.50; \$20 for students (Brantley).

† **"MERE MORTALS."** With this collection of six fast and ferociously funny comedies, that professional tease of a playwright, David Ives, is back at the top of his game. He has fashioned a madcap evening of one-acts that reconfirms his status as a maestro of the short form. By evening's end, your mood may be so improved that you may want to hunt him down and pinch his cheek. Whether his subject is a mating dance on a miniature golf course, the fast-forward life cycle of the mayfly or the machismo of David Mamet, Mr. Ives has the ability to unharness the intoxicating power of language and at the same time entertain. He is served wonderfully by a standout creative team, particularly the director, John Rando, and the set designer, Russell Metheny, who match this playful playwright pound for witty pound (2:00). Houseman, 450 West 42d Street, (212) 239-6200. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 P.M.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2:30 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3 P.M. Tickets: \$47.50 (Marks).



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