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'SPIDER-MAN': TURNS OFF THE CRITICS: With a \$70 million price tag, the firing of original director Julie Taymor & an acquired script doctor, *Spider-Man* remains one of the worst Broadway shows ever. (Left to right) Patrick Page as the Green Goblin & Reeve Carney as Spider-Man in one of many mind-numbing scenes. Photo: Jacob Cohl

Zero (0) Stars

Theater Review

***Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* is still tangled, misguided mess of a 'musical' despite changes**

SPIDER-MAN: TURN OFF THE DARK

Music and lyrics by Bono & The Edge

Book by Julie Taymor, Glen Berger, & Roberto Aguirre-Socasa

Choreography & aerial choreography by Daniel Ezralow

Additional choreography by Chase Brock

Creative consultant: Philip Wm. McKinley

Original direction by Julie Taymor

Foxwoods Theatre

213 West 42nd Street

(877-250-2929), SpiderManOnBroadway.com

By David NouNou

Spider-Man mania has been building for nearly two years and has finally come to its frenzied finale. The world is now officially going to hear the voice of the critics. I am sure Las Vegas has been taking bets to see if the opening would ever take place. The masses have been waiting for months to read the clever new quips the critics are going to hurl at *Spider-Man*. Are they going to eviscerate the show or laud it? Stripped of Julie Taymor's ego and her pretentious folderol, in the Green Goblin's own words at the beginning of Act II, "I'm a \$65 million circus tragedy. Well, more like \$75 million."

The inherent motive of any good musical is a collaborative effort and to be engaging. The audience has to embrace the show. The creators of *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* have taken every precautionary measure to alienate the audience from the proceedings onstage. The most frustrating thing for a critic when reviewing a show like this is: where to begin? The creative powers of *Spider-Man* have spun such a tangled, disjointed mess that even they couldn't get themselves out of it. It is as if every creative department, starting with the book, score, direction, choreography, sets, costumes, lighting, sound each

went to a separate room to start their creative processes and visions and just came back yesterday and discovered that each respective team had a different vision and none of them meshed together.

I will not bother boring the reader with the names of the creative team; they are all listed above and, at this point, who knows who really did what and who cares? Let's begin with the book. We start on Mt. Olympus, where goddesses are usually quibbling about who has more power; Arachne (T.V. Carpio) loses a fight with Athena (heard offstage as a voice), and Arachne is reduced to being a super spider. (Why this was needed to start the show this is anybody's guess) Next, down on earth, Peter Parker (Reeve Carney), a science geek, has a penchant for spiders and is being bullied at school. His love interest is Mary Jane Watson (Jennifer Damiano), his next-door neighbor. The kids go on a science project to Norman Osborn's lab, and Peter is bitten by this giant, mutated (what appears to be plastic) spider that descends from the top of the stage (nobody on the stage sees this but everyone in the audience can). Thus starts the transformation of Peter Parker into Spider-Man, and the rest goes downhill from here. Why spoil the mayhem for you?

A musical is supposed to be fun and an enjoyable experience: be it serious in *Spring Awakening*; madcap and satirical in *The Book of Mormon*; emblematic for its day in *Rent* or *Hair*; old-fashioned and homey in *Oklahoma*; traditional in *Fiddler on the Roof*; or the biggest extravaganza of them all, Sondheim's masterpiece, *Follies*. They all had a collaborative vision that came together cohesively and masterpieces were created. When your book is aimless and does not know if it wants to be taken seriously, done in comic- book style, or as an amusement- park ride, or just plain grabbing at straws and hoping something might stick, then trouble is sure to follow. What passes as comic sections are hurled at us like sledgehammers. The Green Goblin/Norman Osborn (Patrick Page), instead of being an original super villain, has been reduced to a fuzzy Don Rickles in an electric-green scaly suit, doing an abysmal impersonation of Jack Nicholson as the Joker in *Batman*. And by far the worst performance of the evening is Michael Mulheren as J. J. Jameson, editor of the Daily Bugle. His lines are so trite and hackneyed, and talk about proverbial chewing up the scenery.

Next comes the score: Were U2's Bono and The Edge writing a musical or a rock concert? If it was to be a rock concert, all they had to do was go up one block to the St. James Theatre and seen *American Idiot*, as it was still running at the time when *Spider-Man* started previews last fall. That's how a rock concert should have looked. If they wanted to do a traditional variation of animated Broadway musical, they should have taken Julie Taymor with them up another block to the Minskoff Theatre where *The Lion King* is still playing. Instead, they have a hodgepodge musical blend of loud songs that are not memorable or say anything. With the exception of the soaring, haunting "Rise Above" duet by Peter and Arachne (performed on "American Idol" and released as a pop single on iTunes in the USA), and "If the World Should End," a lilting, melodic duet by Peter and Mary Jane, the rest of the songs add nothing to the show.

Next is the direction, or what *appears* to be direction: Screaming, shrieking, hamming, running across the stage in every direction; here, this passes as direction. Spinning and stomping across the stage passes for choreography. George Tsybin's sets give "cheesy" a new definition. I know these sets are

supposed to be representational, but just look at the first two sets that consist of Peter's classroom and the fronts of Peter's and Mary Jane's homes and tell me they don't look like the sets of any high-school production of any show drawn by the art teacher. Also, *enough* with all the different trapdoor openings on the stage.

The costumes by Eiko Ishioka are a blend of hip-hop for the younger characters; imitation *Guys and Dolls* costumes for the news reporting staff; "The Jetsons" for the science lab people; and just plain stupid, lumbering costumes for the Sinister Six (the villains created by the Green Goblin). The lighting is just dark or maybe not dark enough, and the sound is indecipherably loud. All in all, not the proper blend of visionaries for a show of this magnitude.

As far as the performances go, what can one say? Given the material they have to work with, and I am sure the performers are exhausted by now from all the rehearsing all day, adhering to changes every day, and performing at night. Even they have lost sight of what they are supposed to be doing. It is best not to slam them for they are not entirely to blame. One must end on at least one positive note: the flying sequences look good, but all those cables and paraphernalia kind of diminish the magic. However, if you are easily impressed by a man in a harness, sporting tights while soaring over your head, then this may be your show. However, don't worry about this show's future, for as long as there are tourists (God bless them) and teenagers that can afford to shell out the big bucks (they seem to get impressed easily with anything flying over their heads and buy all that souvenir kitsch/merchandise), the show will be around for a while.

Since one has not seen the backstage of the Foxwoods and all the computers that were designed for this debacle, sitting out front one cannot help but wonder how did the price tag of this mess spiral so out of control, and who was responsible to let it inflate to the amount of a reported \$70 million?

What was the money spent on? I have read that Bono is a humanitarian, so wouldn't this money have been put to better use feeding and housing the needy in Africa? Chalk up watching *Spider-Man: Turn Off The Dark* as much like being at a dance club on a really bad acid trip gone horribly wrong, with excruciatingly loud techno music playing all night long, and no relief in sight to make it stop. Ouch.

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