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- « Political Scene: The Deficit, the Recession, and 2012
- Main
- Slide Show: Father's Day Cartoons »

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Spider-Man: Plus Ça Change

Posted by *Joan Acocella*



It's true what they say: in most respects, "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark" is a big nothing. The songs are just standard rock, very loud. The story, of course, is a cartoon fable, better suited to a comic book than to the stage. A couple of the actors are good—including, thank God, those playing the two most important characters, Spider-Man (Reeve Carney) and his evil foe, the Green Goblin (Patrick Page)—but most could be replaced with no loss. The dancing is just a minor turbulence that you have to sit through now and then.

But the visual panoply is marvellous. *Pace* Borat, there is at least one genius from Kazakhstan: George Tsypin. His sets are not so much there as coming and going. A Chrysler Building as tall as the proscenium folds open, like a page, at the front of the stage. Later it's tilted, and we look down from its pinnacle onto tiny yellow cabs, like Matchbox cars, moving along Forty-second Street. You think you're going to throw up, or die of joy.

Equal to the sets is the aerial work. Compared with dancing, flying is very limited. When you're moving in the air on a wire, you can't jump, and you can't travel except in an arc. Most important, you can't use your feet. But Spider-Man seems to discover everything you *can* do. He vaults to the second balcony and stands on the ledge, greeting the people there. He flips over and over while descending from the flies. He and his spirit guide, Arachne, float in the air horizontally, he hovering above her, receiving vibes from her—an eerie and poetic sight. This is different from what Peter Pan did.

Some reviewers have complained about the frank artifice of the aerial work. You can see the wires; they haven't been painted black. The harnesses are even more visible. At one point Spidey looks as though he's wearing an inner tube around his waist. No doubt, this heavy equipment is there to prevent accidents such as those that plagued the rehearsals and previews, but it is also true to the show's postmodern character. The makers of "Spider-Man" would no more hide the wires than they would conceal the actors' mikes. These are not the little beady things peeping out under from the hairdos of most Broadway singers. They are full-out head mikes, like a telephone operator's.

When, after eight weeks of previews, the critics rebelled and bought tickets to the show and panned it, they mostly blamed Julie Taymor, the original director and a famous person (she directed "The Lion King"), who perhaps seemed ripe for chastisement. I would guess, however, that the early critics' scoldings were, in part, a reaction to extra-artistic matters: the loudly bannered cost of the production (by that time, sixty-five million dollars, twice as much as any prior Broadway show), the endless postponement of the opening, the accidents (broken bones, internal hemorrhages)—in other words, the sheer swolleness of the project.

Taymor, no doubt, was partly responsible for that. People complained that it was because of her brainiac mythic stuff, her interest in image and symbol, that the show was so expensive and so delayed. Furthermore, they said, she couldn't tell a story. She was replaced by Philip Wm. McKinley, a less arty showman. (He had directed seven seasons of the Barnum & Bailey circus, plus what the program notes call "the operatic sports-spectacular 'Ben-Hur Live.' ") McKinley and other new hires streamlined the story and made it more cheerful. Perhaps that's why it is so bland. As for what is exciting, much of it seems to have been created during Taymor's reign. The aerial work, for example, was designed by Daniel Ezralow, a long-time collaborator of Taymor's, who was brought onto the show by her and then fired with her.

It's funny: what the critics said about "Spider-Man" earlier in the year is still largely true. "Inspired technical accomplishment and narrative impoverishment," John Lahr wrote. Amen.

Photograph by Jacob Cohl.

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