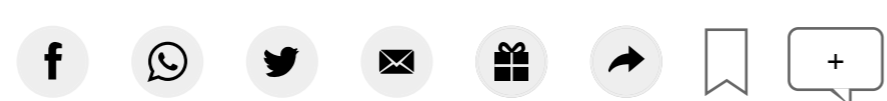


CRITIC'S PICK

Review: ‘Oasis’ Brings Childlike Whimsy to a Manhattan Mall



Edward Rice and Madison Krekel performing in “Oasis” at the Winter Garden in Brookfield Place. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Oasis NYT Critic's Pick
 Closing Date: April 12, 2019 | Off Off Broadway, Dance Play, Interactive, Play
 Winter Garden at Brookfield Place, 230 Vesey St.

By **Laura Collins-Hughes**

April 7, 2019

Under the vaulted glass roof of the Winter Garden, birds twitter and swoop in a grove of palm trees, and the gleaming stone steps climb up and up, curving out toward a vast wall of windows with sweeping Hudson River views.

It’s a dramatic setting, no question, and if you people-watch a while at Brookfield Place, an upscale mall in Lower Manhattan that’s a magnet for office workers and visitors to the nearby 9/11 Memorial, you’ll see small children give into it unselfconsciously. Last week, a little girl in stripes spun and twirled in the open space where the staircase plateaus; down below, a little boy in a puffer coat danced up a few steps and promenaded — a momentary detour into joyful abandon.

Grown-ups, though? They need some coaxing to let go of the everyday. That’s the conceit, anyway, of “[Oasis](#),” a charming, cheering new piece of site-specific theater from the company [Third Rail Projects](#) that opened in the Winter Garden last week, transforming that staircase into the stage it cries out to be.

Spilling down those steps, the oasis of the title is an islet of tropical greenery (the set is by Dan Daly) inhabited by a beneficent mischief-maker called the Muse (Madison Krekel). This is a realm of pleasure and rejuvenation, worlds away from the busy environs where the targets of her magic spend their stressed-out days. (Judging by the costumes, designed by Jessy Smith, the era is the 1980s.)

One by one, these passers-by find themselves whisked from the mall into the oasis: the preppy Manager (Edward Rice), the awkward Pizza Boy (Ryan Wuestewald), the flustered Office Assistant (Julia Kelly), the aerobicized Advertising Executive (Ms. Smith). An enchanted whoosh and the crashing of waves signal their arrival. (Sound design is by Sean Hagerty.)

Under the kindly, efficient, sometimes flirtatious ministrations of the Muse, each of these rigid souls gradually sheds some inhibitions and breaks into dance — playful duets with the Muse and exuberant solos, set to retro tunes like “Come Sail Away” and “Love Will Find a Way.” A few minutes later, when the characters disappear back into the mall, they’re all the better for it.

Or so it seems thus far. Conceived by Jennine Willett with Zach Morris, and directed and choreographed by Ms. Willett, “Oasis” unfolds over 10 episodes, one per weekday, performed at noon and again at 1 p.m. (Being lunchtime entertainment, each lasts about as long as it takes to eat a sandwich.) I have seen only the first five episodes.

There’s no dialogue. But part of the fun of “Oasis,” and part of what makes it work in its setting, is that it’s like a heightened form of people-watching. In the wordlessness of its small dramas and romances, we get to fill in the blanks.

Third Rail Projects is best known for immersive pieces like the long-running “[Then She Fell](#).” The way characters get pulled into the oasis here is reminiscent of the way audience members at those shows might be pulled into a room by an actor to watch a scene.

But “Oasis” — commissioned by [Arts Brookfield](#), the mall owner’s cultural arm — lets spectators simply spectate. And in this age of binge-watching, there’s a quiet satisfaction to seeing a story doled out slowly. Friday’s episode, which brought all five characters together for the first time, felt like a gentle cliffhanger, or at least a pivot point. Where it will go from here I don’t know, and I’m curious to find out.

This Friday at 7:30 p.m., there will be a single performance of all 10 episodes. It’s free. You might want to hit the mall.