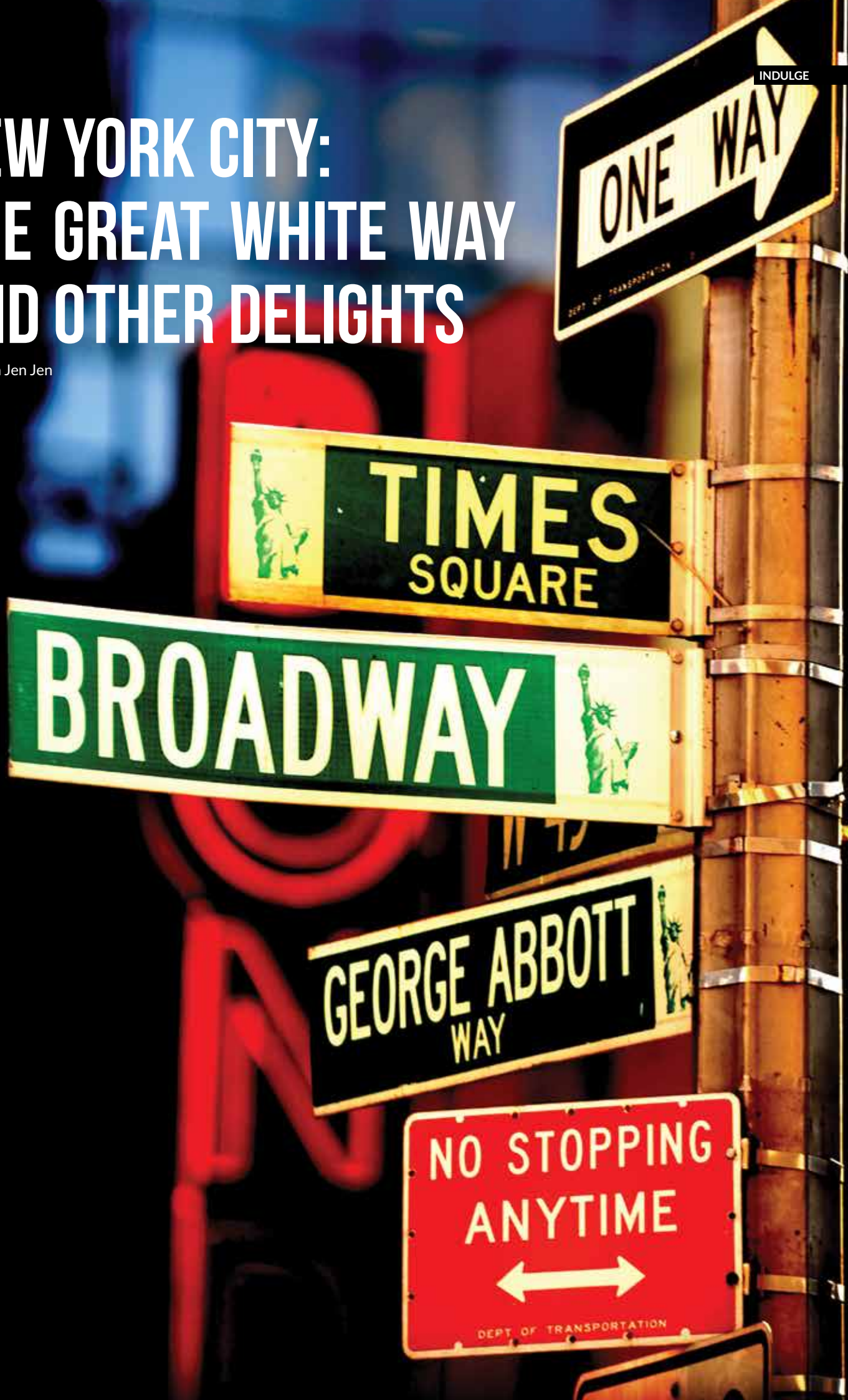


NEW YORK CITY: THE GREAT WHITE WAY AND OTHER DELIGHTS

By Dr Oh Jen Jen





Les Miserables

Photo: Matthew Murphy



Cabaret

MANY TRAVELLERS list the Big Apple as one of their favourite cities, and for good reason. Although traffic is a pain and New Yorkers can be abrasive, the sheer number of different activities available in this city that never sleeps always lures one back again and again.

This marked my third visit to New York City in seven years, with a focus on Broadway's spring 2014 line-up. It was by far the most star-studded season yet, and I had to forgo a few hotly anticipated productions in order to catch the ones I simply couldn't miss.

Although I have a strong preference for musicals, this time, my choices were mainly determined by the cast, resulting in the following four plays. There was a dark comedy (*The Realistic Joneses*) starring a quartet of Hollywood luminaries; a drama based on a John Steinbeck classic (*Of Mice and Men*) featuring the Broadway debuts of James Franco and Chris O'Dowd; a biography about President Lyndon B Johnson (*All the Way*); and another more light-hearted work based on famous American playwright Moss Hart's memoir (*Act One*). Two musical revivals rounded off the list – *Les Miserables* and *Cabaret*, the latter directed by Sam Mendes (*American Beauty* and *Skyfall*).

Every show I attended (even matinees and weekday performances) played to a packed theatre, and each production was memorable, either for exquisite set designs (*Act One's* carousel of immaculate rooms; *Cabaret's* two-tiered stage, complete with disco balls and pineapples suspended from the ceiling), powerhouse acting or jaw-dropping vocals.

My vote for Best Actor in this year's Tonys went to Bryan Cranston as President Johnson in *All The Way*. Following lauded turns in TV's *Breaking Bad* and Oscar-winning film *Argo*, he still chose to detour to the stage, for which I admire him deeply. Despite the heavy subject matter and three-

hour length, Cranston delivered a flawless, awe-inspiring performance that earned a raucous standing ovation.

Cabaret's Michelle Williams was a pleasant surprise, exhibiting musical talent and stage presence in her Broadway debut. An insider I spoke to mentioned that Emma Stone dropped out from the initial cast before Williams agreed to take the role, something I consider a blessing in disguise. Although she admitted to having minimal experience in singing and dancing, Williams' agility and vocal prowess were impressive, and I hope she will continue with theatre work in the future.

While five productions have limited runs, the sixth – *Les Miserables* – has an open-ended one. Prior to this, I had never seen it live, and the latest cast is a veritable dream team of veterans and rising stars. Lead actor Ramin Karimloo deserves special mention – after earning rave reviews as the Phantom on the West End, he now dazzles as Jean Valjean. Boasting one of the most amazing voices I have ever heard, he effortlessly reduced many in the audience to tears. The set design was a little underwhelming compared to other shows, but this is a definite must-see just for the singing alone.

My other favourite thing about Broadway is meeting the actors at the stage door. Success isn't always guaranteed – Bryan Cranston doesn't come out when he has two shows on the same day – but most will make an appearance and are very gracious to their fans. I was most thrilled to meet Michael C Hall and Tony Shalhoub, who starred in two of my favourite TV series (*Dexter* and *Monk* respectively) and who were lovely to talk to. *The Realistic Joneses'* Tracy Letts, a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright who penned *Killer Joe* and *August: Osage County* (both adapted into Hollywood films), even told me his brother has been living in Singapore for the past 20 years, and that he often visits our country.



Photo: Joan Marcus



All the Way

Photo: Evgenia Eliseeva

An unexpected bonus came in the form of tickets to late night talk show host Seth Meyers' monologue rehearsal at the NBC studio. While purchasing NBC souvenirs at the Rockefeller Center store, one of their staff approached me and asked if I'd like to attend. Since I'm a huge fan of his, *of course* I couldn't turn it down! The rehearsal lasted only 15 minutes, compared to a full taping that might take more than an hour, but the audience was much smaller and the setting informal. Meyers was extremely hospitable and showed great interest in foreign visitors, which gave me an excuse to speak to him directly. Upon hearing where I'm from, he replied that he visited Singapore a few years ago for a comedy festival. Too bad I was too flustered to ask whether he ate any chilli crab or durian then!

I also discovered Bryant Park, next to the New York Public Library. A popular haunt for locals and tourists who want to sit and relax, it also features a group of jugglers who give free lessons to anyone game to learn. After taking a while to overcome my self-consciousness, I dove in and, thanks to an excellent teacher, managed to juggle three balls after 15 minutes of practice, and received a badge of recognition from my happy coach! It may not sound like much, but I encourage you to give it a try – it's great fun and you'll feel a significant sense of accomplishment.

Last but not least, every Singaporean's favourite pastime – shopping! My go-to place in New York is Macy's. After a recent renovation, the layout is much less vertigo-inducing, though there're still nine storeys to tempt you. American brands occupy lots of floor space, with price ranges that cater to all tastes – one example is Ralph Lauren. Its so-called "budget" line isn't available in Singapore, and offers high quality designs in vibrant colours, with huge discounts for selected items. If you're buying for kids, check out its

children's collections, which look like they just came off the fashion runway (with very reasonable price tags!). Visitors from outside the US receive an additional 10% discount (have your passport or identification card ready), and there're lots of cafes and restaurants scattered on different floors if you need to recharge. And having patronised Macy's stores in different states, I'm always pleased with their staff, who have impeccable manners and serve with big smiles.

The night before I left, the temperature dipped to freezing point and it snowed till the next morning (yes, in spring). But I considered it a magical finale to a fantastic week-long stay, and hope to return next autumn. See you again soon, New York! ■

Bryan Cranston recently won the Tony Award for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Play, while All the Way was awarded Best Play. Ramin Karimloo had been nominated for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical, and Les Miserables for Best Revival of a Musical.

Broadway show listings are available at <http://www.playbill.com>. Productions planned for next year include musical revivals Gigi and The King and I. You can check the Playbill website for regular updates.

Late Night with Seth Meyers is available online. He will host the Emmy Awards show for the first time on 25 August this year.

For more information, readers can email Jen Jen at ojj75@yahoo.com.



Dr Oh Jen Jen is a consultant at the Department of Emergency Medicine, Singapore General Hospital. When not battling endless patient queues at the hospital, she spends way too much time in front of the TV. An avid blogger since 2002, she also hopes to write a screenplay or novel someday – if she manages to survive her three-monthly episodes of job burnout.