

Cultural Daily

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Amélie: Rising Above the Movie, Not

Sylvie · Wednesday, January 4th, 2017

A wise woman once told me that one cannot rise above a marriage. The good ones surprise you with great joy, the bad ones end sadly or worse. The same appears true of plays and musicals. And *Amélie* at the Ahmanson Theatre also is evidence that you cannot cook up magic with the wrong ingredients...and the wrong sized pot.

Based on the 2001 French film that starred a then-little-known Audrey Tautou in the title role, *Amélie* became an unexpected success largely thanks to Tautou's winsome and deeply bashful authenticity. She was irresistible as the perky *gamine* saddled with a crippling timidity, who is trying to find her way in the Big World. As she surreptitiously does nice things (and sometimes not so nice) for the people around her, many of whom are kindred souls struggling with their own impairments, Tautou was so seductive that we found ourselves rooting for her—especially when love suddenly bloomed and she struggled to learn to accept and welcome it.

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l-r, Adam Chanler-Berat and Phillipa Soo in *Amélie, A New Musical* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

The film version of the tale of this waif growing into a woman who does good in secret because she's too shy to do it openly, had some imaginative flourishes, mostly at the beginning of the movie. These were fresh and very new in their day. But seen from 15 years on, the film by Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Guillaume Laurant is cute, but ultimately pretty thin. So when Craig Lucas (book), Daniel Messé (music), Nathan Tysen (lyrics, with Messé) and director Pam MacKinnon tackled the task of creating a musical out of such fragile stuff, it turned out to be more complicated than they anticipated.

For one thing, the film is episodic and Lucas, by and large, chose to stick to that structure while eliminating or truncating some of the more puzzling elements of the film (e.g. Amélie's disconcerting intrusions into her grocer's apartment for reasons never quite made clear, and her father's garden gnome's seemingly mysterious visits to cities around the world that remain unresolved in the musical). The result is a muddled choppiness and relationships that remain shallow as we move from scene to scene and event to event on a fairly flat trajectory.

This halting tempo is rendered more difficult by David Zinn's restrictive multi-level set (he also designed the costumes). It gives us a central playing area flanked by sets of stairs that lead to

nowhere in particular under the Paris moon, and whose only virtue is looking faintly like Montmartre. The playing area between those stairs is in turn a station waiting room (at the heart of the story), the Café des Deux Moulins (where Amélie works as a waitress, when she's not meddling with the lives of the denizens of the place) and, on occasion, serves as her apartment and other locales. This mixed use results in too much on stage traffic being devoted to moving tables, chairs, counters and doors on and off, as well as the boxy self-portrait photo machine, the ancestor of the selfie and an important player here, where you could take many pictures of yourself for a quarter (here a few francs?) behind a curtain. But if the set is confining, the Ahmanson hall that surrounds it is not and the limited emotional drive of the piece feels even smaller in such an engulfing auditorium.

Adding to the distractions is an Amélie (Phillipa Soo, lately of the *Hamilton* cast on Broadway) who lacks the one essential she is required to possess: an authentic shyness. Soo, who looks a lot like Tautou in a wig specifically cut to achieve that match, is simply too naturally self-assured, even when she tries not to be. But when you lose this Tautou quality, you lose everything. And when you lose everything, you fill in the blanks with...stuff—all that trivial busy work mentioned above. Which is what most afflicts this musical. Instead of feeling light and magical—the stated goal—this *Amélie* is steadfastly earthbound.

No fault of the actors who are a talented bunch, but some undeniable disappointment in MacKinnon's staging as she tries to cope with a lot of platitudinous action dictated by the script. All the people work hard at making this thing come together, but that's the problem. Everyone is breathlessly *working* at it, while the hoped-for lighthearted loopiness remains stubbornly out of reach.



The Cast of *Amélie, A New Musical*, I did not see the musical at Berkeley Rep where it originated in as it introduces itself to the 2015, so cannot speak to what changes may (or not) have been audience at The Ahmanson Theatre. made since, but what plays out on the Ahmanson stage is tiresome and feels dated in form and style. There is not much dancing (choreography and musical staging is by Sam Pinkleton). From my seat in the fifth row of the auditorium, the solo singers were frequently overwhelmed by the orchestra (sound design is by Kai Harada). Perhaps because the creative team stuck to the turn-of-the-21st-century period of the film, the entire enterprise has a slightly stale, old-fashioned feel.

For reasons best known to the producers, this almost two-hour show is presented without an intermission, which doesn't help. Since many of the episodes are repetitious and there is little variety in its forward movement and since it lacks memorable characters or charm, the performance feels endless. None of which, I must add, prevents this *Amélie* from being headed to Broadway to try its luck in the spring.

Top image: An exuberant Adam Chanler-Berat as Nino in Amélie, A New Musical now at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Photos by Joan Marcus

WHAT: *Amélie, A New Musical*

WHERE: Ahmanson Theatre, Music Center, 135 No. Grand Ave., Downtown Los Angeles, CA 90012.

WHEN: Tue-Fri, 8pm; Sat, 2 & 8pm; Sun, 1 & 6:30pm. Ends January 15.

HOW: Tickets \$25-\$125, available online at www.cetertheatregroup.org or at 213.972.4400 or in person at the Ahmanson Theatre box office.

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