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American in Paris Soars; Gigi and Shoulda Fizzle

David Sheward · Thursday, April 30th, 2015

Three recently-opened Broadway musicals rely on old forms but only one employs its source material with originality and charm. Both *An American in Paris* and *Gigi* are based on classic 1950s MGM movies set in the City of Light and starring Leslie Caron, while *It Shoulda Been You* retreads TV sitcoms.



Leanne Cope and Robert Fairchild in *An American in Paris*

Credit: Angela Sterling

Let's take the successful one first. The credits for *An American in Paris* say it was "inspired" by the 1951 Gene Kelly-Leslie Caron film favorite which won the Best Picture Oscar over such weightier dramas as *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *A Place in the Sun*. Alan Jay Lerner's screenplay wrapped a simplistic story around the George and Ira Gershwin songbook and legendary helmer Vincente Minnelli gave it his unmistakable stamp of class and joy. Similarly director-choreographer Christopher Wheeldon gives an elegant and intoxicating spin to Craig Lucas' new book. We are still in post-war Paris but now the brutalities of the just-ended Nazi occupation seep into the basically silly plot of three pals in love with the same gamine girl, this time a fledgling dancer. Though the romance is far-fetched, the Gershwins' evergreen tunes (gorgeously adapted by Rob Fisher) and Wheeldon's ballet-informed dances, along with Bob Crowley's sophisticated sets and costumes, Natasha Katz's painterly lighting, and the evocative video projections of 59 Productions create an inviting Paris which is both fantasy and reality. Ballet stars Robert Fairchild and Leanne Cope not only dance the Kelly and Caron roles to perfection they also sing and act with conviction, conveying the churning emotions of these lovestruck dreamers. When they come together in the titular ballet sequence, it's as close to ecstasy as you'll get on the Broadway stage. Brandon Uranowitz, Max von Essen, Jill Paice, and Veanne Cox enliven their supporting roles.



Victoria Clark, Vanessa Hudgens, and Corey Cott in *Gigi*

Credit: Margot Schulman

Gigi from 1958 also starred Caron, was directed by Minnelli and written by Lerner, and won the Best Picture Oscar over such darker nonmusicals as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Defiant Ones*. Lerner and his composer partner Frederick Loewe provided the original score to the film's sanitized adaptation of Colette's novel about the title heroine who is bred to be a French mistress but would rather be a bourgeois wife. Unlike *An American in Paris*, the plot contains scant conflict

and while the songs from the film still enchant, the newer ones from a 1973 stage version add little. Heidi Thomas' adapted book is even more scrubbed up than Lerner's screenplay and Eric Schaeffer has directed his company to play every line with exaggerated "ooh-la-la" broadness (Howard McGillin in the Maurice Chevalier role is particularly guilty of this Gallic mugging.) As *Gigi*, Vanessa Hudgens of the *High School Musical* films sings with brio as does her leading man Corey Cott. She has plenty of spunk but no irresistible sparkle while Cott exudes manly charm. They are closer in age than the originals of Caron and Louis Jordan, but there is no sexual tension between them. Broadway vets Victoria Clark and Dee Hoty provide much needed vinegar as *Gigi*'s worldly guardians and Catherine Zuber's gowns are ravishing.

It Shoulda Been You is nominally a totally original musical, not being based on an old movie, novel, or play, but Brian Hargrove's book uses hackneyed gags that went out of date 40 years ago and Barbara Anselmi's music is generic but pleasant. Anselmi is also credited with the "concept" and there are five lyricists in addition to Hargrove credited. This is a definite case of too many cooks.



Chip Zien, Tyne Daly, Harriet Harris, and Michael X. Martin in *It Shoulda Been You*
Credit: *Joan Marcus*

Two families of stereotypes clash at a Manhattan wedding and the guestbook reads like checklist of clichés: overbearing Jewish mother of the bride, alcoholic WASP mother of the groom, flamboyant wedding planner, panicky bride, goofy groom, etc., etc. Sitcom-level plot twists proliferate as doors slam on Anna Louizos' two-level set. I will admit the show is much better than when I saw it four years at New Jersey's George Street Playhouse. It's much tighter and shorter. Fortunately, director David Hyde-Pierce (Hargrove's husband) and a cast of polished professionals headed by Tyne Daly and Harriet Harris transform the second-drawer material into a tolerable 100 minutes. Special kudos to Lisa Howard as the plus-sized sister of the bride for creating a full-sized character in this tiny tuner.

Final verdict: cheers for *American*; a shrug of the shoulders for *Gigi* and *Shoulda*.

An American in Paris: Opened April 12 for an open run. Palace Theatre, 1564 Broadway, NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed, Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission; \$47—\$147. (800) 653-8000 or www.ticketmaster.com.

Gigi: Opened April 8 for an open run. Neil Simon Theatre, 250 W. 52nd St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed, Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. \$75.75—\$156.75. (877) 250-2929 or www.ticketmaster.com.

It Shoulda Been You: Opened April 14 for an open run. Brooks Atkinson Theatre, 256 W. 47th St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed, Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: One hour and 40 mins. with no intermission. \$90—\$149. (800) 653-8000 or www.ticketmaster.com.

This review has previously appeared on Theaterlife.com.

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