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Bat-Sh*t Crazy Musical

David Sheward · Wednesday, August 28th, 2019

“You have to go over the top to see what’s on the other side.” So says one of the bizarre, cartoonish characters in *Bat Out of Hell*, the musical based on a series of rock albums recorded by the singer Meat Loaf. In this show, they definitely go over the top, but you may not want to see what’s on the other side. As with most jukebox musicals, *Bat*, which has had a circuitous route to New York through London and Toronto, has a built-in audience ready to sing along to such hits as the title anthem to anarchy, “Two Out of Three Ain’t Bad,” and “You Took the Words Right Out of My Mouth.” But the story Jim Steinman has concocted to unify his songs of passion, loss, rebellious youth, and love of rock, stretches patience and credulity. If you’re a fan of the material, none of that matters, but for those of us not obsessively enamored of the *Bat* tunes, it’s just so much clanging in the belfry.



Andrew Polec in *Bat Out of Hell*.

Credit: Little Fang Photo

Angry youth clashing with authoritarian adults is the main theme of Steinman’s twisted scenario. In a post-apocalyptic Manhattan renamed Obsidian, gangs of eternally arrested adolescents called freezers, because they’re frozen at 18 due to chemical mutation, aimlessly roam dark alleyways and tunnels like punk Peter Pans. The group’s leader Strat, a scrawny would-be poet spouting Steinman’s lyrics as if they were Shakespeare, falls for Raven, the lonely, disenchanted daughter of Falco, the megarich industrialist running Obsidian with an iron fist. That’s basically it as far as story goes. There are a few subplots scattered amidst the debris of Jon Bausar’s nightmarish set (he also designed the *Mad Max*-inspired costumes). Falco’s wife, Sloane, is dissatisfied with her marriage. Pixieish, sexually ambivalent Tink—get the reference to Tinkerbell?—is jealous of Strat’s obsession with Raven. Zahara, one of Strat’s gang, secretly works for Falco as some sort of nurse-companion-maid, and has a deep, dark secret, but we never find out what it is.



Andrew Polec and Christina Bennington in *Bat Out of Hell*.

Credit: Little Fang Photo

None of these threads is gripping enough to merit our compassion or even attention since Steinman has barely strengthened them beyond lead-ins to the songs. Fortunately, director Jay Schieb delivers a souped-up, bells-and-whistles production to distract from the lack of depth (similarly to Alex Timbers’ job on *Moulin Rouge* which seems like a Sondheim musical by comparison). With the aide of Finn Ross’s video design and Patrick Woodroffe’s rock-concert lighting, the action is at

least fast-paced (for about half of the show) and occasionally imaginative. In one spectacularly fun sequence, Raven's lavish birthday banquet table is transformed into a classic Cadillac for a flashback to her parents' teenage trysting and a spirited rendition of the extended story-song "Paradise by the Dashboard Light." To top it all off, Raven impossibly rips the engine out of the car and hurls it into the orchestra pit. Then, several musicians crawl out, dragging their wrecked instruments with them. This was an oasis of madcap lunacy in a sea of pretentiousness. Despite the intermittent burst of such clever staging and solid rock vocals, Steinmsan's conceit runs out of steam soon after the second act begins.



Bradley Den and Lena Hall in *Bat Out of Hell*

Credit: Little Fang Photo

The hard-working cast all possess vibrant singing chops, but most fail to get us to care about their characters. Andrew Polec is whiny rather than compelling as Strat. Bradley Dean's Falco is goofy instead of menacing and Christina Bennington's Raven is a spoiled brat when she should be a lost soul. Only Lena Hall's compassionate Sloane and Danielle Steers' robust Zahara suggest depths beyond Steinmsan's adolescent pop sensibility.

Aug. 8—Sept. 8. New York City Center, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Tue—Fri, 7pm, Sat 2PM & 8pm, Sun 1:30pm & 7pm. Running time: two hours and 40 mins. including intermission. \$45—\$225. (212) 581-1212. www.nycitycenter.org.

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