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On a Clear Day Boasts Beautiful Songs, Not Much Else

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 18th, 2018

In the world of Broadway musical theater, do terrific songs offset a limp book? That's the question posed by Irish Repertory Theater's small-scale revival of Alan Jay Lerner and Burton Lane's 1965 curiosity *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*. This is one of those tuners that has more than its share of flaws, had a modest original run, and is occasionally hauled out of the closet for its memorable melodies. Lerner's brilliant lyrics and Lane's smooth, sweet music are always a pleasure to listen to, but you have to suffer through Lerner's sitcom-like book, unmitigated by director-adaptor Charlotte Moore's alternations.

Melissa Errico and Stephen Bogardus in *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever.*
Credit: Carol Rosegg

The plot, such as it is, centers on Daisy Gamble, a waifish kook and unknowing wielder of such trendy supernatural skills as ESP, precognition, and the ability to make flowers grow rapidly by talking to them. When psychiatrist Mark Bruckner hypnotizes her to cure her smoking habit, she regresses into a past existence as sophisticated British aristocrat Melinda Welles. Naturally, Mark falls in love with the alluring Melinda but can't stand the quirky, odd-duck Daisy. Despite the absurdity of the plotline, the score contains numerous gems. "Hurry, It's Lovely Up Here" is a delightfully whimsical charm number for Daisy to coax blossoms into bloom (who else but Lerner could rhyme "geranium" with "subterranium" or "RSVP" with "peonies"?) "He Wasn't You" is lushly romantic, "S.S. Bernard Cohn" is zippy and full of show-biz razzmatazz, and "What Did I Have That I Don't Have" a satisfying ten o'clock number, but it's sung a half-hour too early.

As noted, the original starring the gamine Barbara Harris and the virile John Cullum was an uneven shipwreck, lost amid smashes like *Man of La Mancha*, *Mame*, and *Sweet Charity*, and closing after 280 performances. (Excerpts from the show performed on a TV special can be found on YouTube.) Vincente Minelli's overstuffed 1970 film version featured the unlikely pairing of Barbra Streisand and Yves Montand with a young Jack Nicholson in a tiny role. Cecil Beaton's costumes for the regression scenes were the movie's highlight. A 2011 revival recast Daisy as David, a gay male florist and Melinda as a female 1940s jazz singer, injecting a bisexual subtext into Mark's attraction, but Peter Parnell's revised book failed to stitch together these myriad sexual and psychic threads and the attempt closed after only 57 performances.

John Cudia and Melissa Errico in *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*.

Credit: Carol Rosegg

Moore returns the show to its goofy origins, stripping away extraneous characters such as Daisy's stuffy fiance, her hippie stepbrother (Nicholson's role in the film) and a Greek shipping magnate desperate to find the secret of reincarnation so he can leave his fortune to his future self. Moore's staging is direct and efficient with the small ensemble and an underused revolving staging providing scene changes (James Morgan designed the simple sets and the sweetly cartoonish projections.) The show is still something of a hot mess with the songs the only bright spots. Kudos to music director John Bell and the small orchestra.

As Daisy and Mark, Melissa Errico and Stephen Bogardus are reliable Broadway veterans, professionally hitting their marks and notes, but failing to generate any electricity between each other or the audience. John Cudia displays a sexy, strong baritone as Melinda's Regency lover and the eight-member chorus is pleasantly versatile. Unlike other constantly revived and retuned shows such as *Follies* or *Show Boat*, *On a Clear Day* will never be more than mildly pleasant. Moore has made the show a bit clearer, but I wouldn't want it to last forever. A brief listen to those catchy songs is enough.

June 28—Sept. 2. Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St., NYC. Wed 3pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 3pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 15 mins. including intermission. $50—$70. (212) 727-2737. www.irishrep.org.

This review previously appeared on Theaterlife.com.

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