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Come from Away, B'way's First 9-11 Musical, Plus Idomeneo at the Met

David Sheward · Wednesday, March 22nd, 2017

Is it appropriate for a Broadway musical to address the staggering impact of the 2001 attacks on America? *Come from Away*, the new Canadian tuner, answers with a resounding yes. Husband and wife librettist-songwriters Irene Sankoff and David Hein have solved the problem of their super-heavy subject matter by focusing on a positive aspect of the tragedy. When terrorists were using planes as bombs targeting the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, several hundred flights were diverted to Gander, a tiny town in New Foundland where thousands of passengers had to remain for days. How the citizens and their guests from around the world coped with this logistical nightmare forms the main thread of the show with several individual story-strands interwoven throughout. The New Foundlanders respond to the demands with grace and humor and the panicked “plane people” gradually warm to them.



The cast of *Come from Away*

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Yes, the book is episodic and the songs are a bit treacly here and there, occasionally taking a mite too much inspiration from the *Titanic* theme which is quoted ironically more than once. However, Sankoff and Hein resist these Lifetime-TV temptations for the most part, leavening syrupy “feel-good” tropes with sharp wit and memorable, Gaelic-flavored music.

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Director Christopher Ashley keeps the many characters and settings clear with a precise, fluid direction and strong, detail-laden performances from a twelve-member cast playing multiple roles. Jenn Colella has the sole solo number as a pioneering female pilot and soars with it. Joel Hatch is dryly deadpan as the town’s mayor. Rodney Hicks gets maximum comic mileage out of a New Yorker’s skepticism at his hosts’ hospitality. Lee MacDougall and Sharon Wheatley are endearingly awkward as middle-aged strangers who become long-distance lovers. Chad Kimball and Caesar Samayoa lend snap to a quarreling gay couple. Petrina Bromley delivers an animal lover’s concern for pets trapped on board with a direct honesty. Astrid Van Wierren is refreshingly blunt as a no-nonsense teacher. Kendra Kassebaum makes a nervous new TV reporter endearingly eager and Q. Smith emotes with intensity as a mother seeking word of her firefighter son.

Not all instincts tapped by the crisis are noble. A Muslim traveller (played with dignity by

Samayoa) is treated with fear and suspicion, though gradually befriended by the townspeople, and then subjected to a humiliating interrogation. I would have preferred Sankoff and Hein had ventured further into this darkness, to give a fuller picture of the story. But despite its slight flaws, *Come From Away* offers a reassuring and heartening take on the earth-shattering event that launched us into an age of terrifying uncertainty.



Matthew Polenzani in *Idomeneo*

Credit: Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera

The Metropolitan Opera's staging of Mozart's *Idemeneo* is also about a community in crisis, but the citizens of ancient Crete are handling a ravenous sea monster rather than an influx of displaced passengers. This revival of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's 1982 staging is gorgeously sung by soprano Ying Fang as the delicate princess Ilia, baritone Matthew Polenzani in the title role, and mezzo-soprano Alice Coote in the trouser role of the prince Adamante. Maestro James Levine delivers his customary exquisite handling of the Met orchestra. But the four-hour evening is stolen by Elza van den Heever as the treacherously jealous Elettra.

Like a libidinous tornado swooping in from another opera (such as Strauss' modernistic *Electra* about the same mythological figure), van den Heeven sweeps away all before her in a whirlwind of diva passion. During her Act Two aria in which Elettra eagerly anticipates thwarting her rival Ilia and ensnaring Adamante, she practically makes love to the furniture as she physicalizes her character's devouring lust. Then after everyone else finds a happy ending, she consumes the stage in a towering rage and collapses, choking on her own fury. Most of Ponnelle's staging is of the "stand and deliver" or "park and bark" variety where the singers are planted center stage and hold forth for their solos. Van den Heever is anything but stationary or static, taking command of this massive work and wrestling it to the ground.

Come From Away: Opened March 12 for an open run. Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre, 236 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue, Thu, 7 pm; Wed, Fri—Sat, 8 pm; Wed, Sat, 2 pm; Sun, 3 pm. \$47—\$157. Running time: one hour and 40 mins. with no intermission. \$47—\$157. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

Idomeneo: March 6—25. Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center, 66th St. and Broadway, NYC. Repertory schedule. Running time: four hours including two intermissions. \$25—\$460. (212) 362-6000 or www.metopera.org.

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