

Cultural Daily

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Come from Away Shines a Light on Human Kindness

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, February 13th, 2019

Come from Away is not your typical musical. It's based on the real life circumstances of how a small town by the name of Gander, in Newfoundland, Canada, became the epicenter of humanitarian relief efforts in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The residents of Gander became the unsuspecting host to 7,000 passengers when 38 planes bound for New York were suddenly diverted to Gander International Airport in the wake of the deadliest terrorist attack in history. The show's title is a nod to the expression used by locals to describe people who come from other parts of the world to visit. The first national tour is currently playing at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts through February 17th.

Come from Away was written by David Hein and Irene Sankoff, a Canadian married couple and writing team who flew to Gander on the ten-year anniversary of 9/11 and conducted interviews which became the basis for the musical that would make its way to Broadway by 2017. Hein and Sankoff capture the highs and the lows deftly, mining the humor and the pathos to its full extent. Within the space of its one-and-a-half hour intermission-less running time, Sankhoff and Hein create a taut but rich story which rings true (because it is), inviting the audience to become fully invested in the lives of the passengers and their more-than-accommodating hosts. What's more, it's sure to leave the most hardened cynic in tears and laughter by the time the ensemble takes their final bow.

The energetic opening song "Welcome to the Rock" has a rhythmic urgency that captures the tone of the salt-of-the-earth inhabitants of this small town on the edge of nowhere. It's not the type of soundtrack you're likely to walk out humming the songs, though it was nominated for a Grammy for Best Musical. Nor is there one single performance that stands out from the rest, but it's rather the collective power of the ensemble that is greater than the sum of its parts. This unassuming show will get under your skin like no other and leave a lasting impression. It might even restore your faith in human decency.

Come from Away features a multi-faceted 8-piece band which captures the unique sounds and spirit of this show, with musicians playing a range of exotic and familiar instruments including an accordion, a fiddle, mandolins, Irish flutes, Uilleann pipes, and a percussion instrument known as a Bodhran. Set against a simple backdrop with a minimalist set design, this talented ensemble (many of them playing multiple roles) serves as a microcosm of the multi-cultural society we inhabit and the lives that intersected in the aftermath of this tragedy.



Becky Gulsvig soars as pilot Beverley in *Come from Away*.

Like many a crisis that makes heroes out of ordinary folks, *Come from Away* celebrates ordinary people from all walks of life who stepped up in extraordinary ways. Even though *Come from Away* is truly an ensemble piece in the best sense of that description, it's worth taking a moment to highlight some of the individual performers such as Becky Gulsvig who plays Beverley, a female pilot who flew one of the diverted planes. In the song "Me and the Sky," she recalls her childhood dreams and determination to become one of the first women to become a pilot, and then advance to captain, in a field dominated by men. Gulsvig's distinctive voice embodies the steely determination it must've taken to succeed against such odds and when she hits those long sustained high notes, she soars. Nick Duckart pulls double duty as half of a gay couple, both named Kevin, who provide some of the comic relief, as well as a middle-Eastern passenger named Ali who suddenly finds himself under suspicion by virtue of his background. Andrew Samonsky turns in a winning performance as the other half of the gay couple. Julie Johnson brings an earthy credibility to Beulah, one of the chief organizers of the effort to help the "come from aways." Christine Toy Johnson (as Diane) and Chamblee Ferguson (as Nick) bring some heartfelt levity as two middle-aged single people (he's from England and she's from Texas) who find love in these unlikely circumstances. I'd be remiss not to mention another standout, James Earl Jones II who plays Bob, the New Yorker who is the epitome of the fish-out-of-water. Jones strikes just the right tone as an innately distrustful urbanite who finds himself in uncharted territory amidst the disarmingly trusting residents of Gander. One such comedic gem is when Bob is asked to "collect" grills from neighbors' yards for the cookout. Coming from a city where this would be grounds for arrest (or worse), Bob is taken completely off guard when one of the neighbors offers to give him a hand.

Come from Away serves as a time capsule for an expression of human kindness and compassion which could easily have wound up a forgotten footnote. As painful as it is to relive the events of 9/11, there's something cathartic and healing about experiencing it through this life-affirming prism.

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