

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Good Neighbors In The Pond Next Door

Sylvie · Wednesday, December 5th, 2018

It's not easy to explain, but it's a phenomenon familiar to theatregoers of the past 20 years or so. What I'm talking about is a different kind of musical, developed about subjects that could be seen as wrong for a mainstream show. Think *Next to Normal*, based on bipolar disease; *Fun Home*, about a family living with a bisexual father; even *Grey Gardens*, which traces eccentricity's strange effect on a mother and daughter of wealth, standing and position in society.

Yet the reality is that such limitations never apply. Not to musicals, not to plays. Someone will always come up with something that others never thought could make a good musical, and proceed to create an improbably fine one anyway.



The ensemble company of *Come From Away* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

A modern musical inspired by events surrounding the American tragedy of 9/11 might seem like a stretch. Yet *Come From Away*, which just landed at The Ahmanson Theatre, does precisely that by focusing, not on the tragedy, but on the peripheral fallout: the generosity of the citizens of the small town of Gander, Newfoundland, who took a deep breath and refused to be daunted when 38 unexpected airplanes had to be diverted to Gander Airport because of the 9/11 attacks. Suddenly, a population of about 10,000 people had to deal with close to 7,000 uninvited guests.

And now we have the musical: *Come From Away*, an upbeat, noisy, engagingly choral musical with no "stars," but an ensemble company of eager and talented performers giving it their all and reminding us that, while human beings can be cruel, many also can be kind, helpful and resourceful.

It almost sounds sappy, I know, but *Come From Away* doesn't care. It delivers what it always intended to deliver, not less and not more, with musicians, actors and singers whose energy is almost always given at 110%. The show is a smoothly synchronized effort without much of a plot, music that is right for the subject matter, relying on that most popular equation of all: a communion of good persons dedicated to delivering good deeds.

No wonder audiences reacted enthusiastically when the show played New York. Nothing like showing some spunk in the face of adversity. And it will no doubt draw the same kind of response as this touring company travels across the country.

The book, lyrics and a score that leans toward the anthem were all created by Canadians Irene

Sankoff and David Hein, who also happen to be married to each other. They knew better than to inflict a message. They merely reported on events that speak for themselves.



Betty Gulsvig, foreground, as Beverley, with the company of *Come From Away* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

We all know that too much goodness can border on boredom, but Sankoff and Hein guard against that by delivering a few vivid personal sketches in the mix. While everyone in the company plays more than one role, they zero in on one or two individuals now and then: the mayor of the town, the two Kevins, a woman named Beverley who's the pilot of one of the airplanes (Betty Gulsvig, remembered for her star turn in *Legally Blonde*), and a lively comic actor, in multiple roles, who goes by the name of James Earl Jones II (no claim of a relationship to the original in the bio). No point in trying to tell you more because they are all otherwise intentionally interchangeable.

More interesting is the inclusion of some instruments germane to Newfoundland, such as the bodhrán (an Irish hand-held drum), some 20 kinds of whistles (high and low), the Celtic fiddle (expertly played by Kiana June Weber), the button accordion, and a mop-and-bottle-caps-screwed-into-a-boot called an "Ugly Stick." I confess that these descriptions are all lifted *verbatim* from the album notes.

Come From Away was developed in many places, but it had its world premiere at the La Jolla Playhouse. It was then — and still is — boisterously directed by La Jolla's Artistic Director, Christopher Ashley. Musical arrangements and supervision are by Ian Eisendrath and the musical staging is by Kelly Devine.



The ensemble company of *Come From Away* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Other individuals — all of them in fact — deserve recognition. But it's not that kind of show. It's about an ensemble — a company of performers joining together to portray other people helping still other people in need, and reminding us that our humanity has a thread of divinity that saves us when we most need saving. Or, as Hein reminds us in a program note: "It's community."

It's a simple show about human decency as the common denominator and where "feel-good" is the byword.

Top image: the cast of Come From Away at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Photos by Matthew Murphy

WHAT: *Come From Away*

WHERE: Center Theatre Group Ahmanson Theatre, 135 No. Grand Ave., Los Angeles 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays 2 & 8pm; Sundays 1 & 6:30pm. Ends Jan 6, 2019. Added performance 2 pm, 12/27 & 7pm 12/31. No public performance 12/5. No performances 12/25 and 01/01/19.

HOW: \$30–\$135 (subject to change), available at 213.972.4400 or online at CenterTheatreGroup.org or in person at the Box Office. Deaf community: Info & charge at CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS. Groups: 213.972.7231.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, December 5th, 2018 at 8:40 pm and is filed under [Theatre](#), [Discourse](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.