Cultural Daily

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Guys & Dolls: A Perennial Entertainment?

Sylvie · Wednesday, December 9th, 2015

There is plenty of expectation as well as plenty of nostalgia in a show as well loved and remembered — and as frequently revived — as the Frank Loesser/Jo Swerling/Abe Burrows *Guys & Dolls.* But when the enterprising Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF), which has broadened its theatrical menu in the past few years, sent down its production of *Guys & Dolls* to the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills, our ears perked up.

Not only is OSF worthy of attention (the Wallis hosted OSF's jaunty production of *Into The Woods* a few months back), but this *Guys & Dolls* was staged by Mary Zimmernan, whose reputation for originality and inventiveness as a director precede her by a mile and rarely disappoint.

Based on some of Damon Runyon's celebrated short stories, this 1950 Tony Award-winner has been a champ ever since for professional and college theatres, both of which love to revive it. It's fun, it has more than enough parts to go around and it harbors not a spot of controversy. The musical was filmed in 1955 with Frank Sinatra as Nathan Detroit and Marlon Brando as Sky Masterson. And it almost won the 1951 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, were it not for the long shadow cast on Abe Burrows by the House Un-American Activities Committee. (Result: no Pulitzer for Drama was awarded that year.)

The gamblers of *Guys and Dolls* at The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills.

On the other hand, to say that the production at the Wallis meets these high expectations is only partially correct. Daniel Pelzig's lively and engaging choreography certainly shines through, invigorating the entire undertaking (there is *plenty* of fine dancing in this *Guys & Dolls*). This is a fable after all of a Depression-era New York filled with benign gamblers and their molls, of bets placed and ultimately won, even of souls redeemed and remanded to suburbia in a joyful and tender *what-me-worry?* atmosphere.

Most of the actors, many cast nontraditionally in this case, bring the right talent, energy and pizazz to their roles. But the really inventive surprises one had hoped for at Zimmerman's hands are sparsely delivered — among them a lovely little silver aircraft crossing the stage taking its precious cargo to and from Havana; movable miniatures of New York City landmarks. The overall simplicity of Daniel Ostling's bare set with its movable furniture and walls (and the actors willing to move them) is a form of streamlining that's mostly welcome in the theatre. But, in the end, this remains a pretty traditional production of a show that, for all of its superior ingredients, especially

the presence of Frank Loesser's many delicious songs, is showing its age.

l-r, Jeremy Peter Johnson, Richard Howard and Kate Hurster in *Guys & Dolls* at The Wallis in Beverly Hills.

It feels more drawn out than it should (too much for our impatient attention spans?) and, of course, it is very much the child of the more innocent era in which it was conceived and birthed. Some audiences will bask in the fantasy that makes *Guys & Dolls* more quaint than timely; others who may be seeing it for the first time will find it a zippy and enjoyable period piece that distracts from the stresses of today. Does it speak to us? Yes, of course, as a pleasantly rose-colored reflection of Depression times past.

But there are a few missing pieces. Chemistry for one. Things might have been more exciting if more of it existed between the lovers in this production. We enjoy listening to the splendid Robin Goodwin Nordli, as Miss Adelaide, lament about her 14-year engagement that has only produced a cold in the head and no wedding; her connection to her chosen love boat, the nimble Rodney Gardiner's Nathan Detroit, lacks that essential lovers' *je-ne-sais-quoi*. As for Kate Hurster's Sarah, she's more persuasive as a buttoned-up Salvation Army officer, even with a few too many Cuban Milkshakes in her bloodstream, than when she's around that handsome dude Sky Masterson, the object of her infatuation (Jeremy Peter Johnson). Hey, guys, haven't you heard? We need to *feel* the love, not just hear about it.

l-r, Kate Hurster and Robin Goodrin Nordli in *Guys & Dolls* at The Wallis

The live orchestra under Doug Peck's musical direction is a pleasure (he also did the orchestrations). So is the work of the rest of the creative team, which includes Ray Nardelli's sound design, T.J Gerckens lighting, Susan Sweeney's commendable voice and text direction, and Mara Blumenfeld's costumes.

Among the actors, it's important to mention the portly Daniel T. Parker's gamblin' and gallivantin' Nicely-Nicely and Richard Howard's Arvide Abernathy, the Salvation Army elder and wise uncle to Sarah who sets a sweet, becalming tone. But all of that doesn't entirely overcome a sneaky by-the-book quality to the production that's hard to pin down given the amount of talent involved — especially when so many individual strengths mysteriously don't entirely come together to deliver a whole.

Foreground:a victorious Robin Goodrin Nordli holds up her paramour, Rodney Gardiner, in a triumphant final scene from *Guys & Dolls*

Top image: The cast of Guys & Dolls *with Daniel T. Parker (right) as Nicely-Nicely at The Wallis.*

Photos by Kevin Parry for the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts.

WHAT: *Guys & Dolls*

WHERE: Bram Goldsmith Theater at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, 9390 Santa Monica Blvd., Beverly Hills, CA 90210.

WHEN: Tuesday-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays 3 & 8pm; Sundays 2 & 7pm. Ends Dec. 20.

HOW: Tickets $39-$110 (subject to change), available at 310.746.4000 or online at www.thewallis.org or in person at the theatre's Ticket Services.

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