

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Minute She Walked In the Joint

Ann Haskins · Wednesday, June 27th, 2018

Like a phoenix rising from its ashes, *Reprise 2.0* reboots its popular showcase for classic Broadway musicals. After more than a decade of success, the original founder Marcia Seligson left and the series closed several years later after hard financial times. Seligson returned to helm the revamped series, announcing a new season with three shows and attracting Tony-award winning choreographer-director Kathleen Marshall to stage the dance-drenched *Sweet Charity* as the opener. Marshall is among a rare species—a female dancer who moved to Broadway choreographer and then on to choreographer/director status. Along the way, she garnered a slew of awards, including three of Broadway’s Tony awards.

In a telephone interview just before rehearsals began, Marshall talked about some of the prep work that preceded the intense three week rehearsal process, including costumes, design, and casting, particularly the choice of Laura Bell Bundy in the title role of Charity Hope Valentine.

Originally created on Broadway by Bob Fosse, the role of the taxi dancer with a heart of gold was created for Fosse’s then wife Gwen Verdon and for Shirley MacLaine in the film version. Charity has been played in revivals by talents that include Debbie Allen and Christine Applegate. Tony-nominated for her leading role in *Legally Blond the Musical*, Bell Bundy takes on the challenge with extensive recording, film and TV credits, as well as her long list of musical theater work.



Laura Bell Bundy in *Reprise 2.0*’s *Sweet Charity*. Photo by Michael Lamont.

Asked to describe what Bell Bundy brings to the role, Marshall paused then responded by first talking about the character: “Charity has had a tough life. She’s in a tough profession in a tough town, but despite circumstances that keep pushing her down, Laura brings to Charity an energy and light that is what Charity finds in herself as she fights her way to the sunshine.”

Aside from her experience with big budget Tony-nominated Broadway musicals, Marshall is no stranger to the type of partially staged revivals of classic Broadway shows. For several years, she led New York’s *Encore* series which was the prototype on which the original *Reprise* was based. And she knows how to maneuver a full onstage orchestra, professional performers, and minimal sets (don’t expect helicopters to fly in) that let musical itself take the spotlight. Only last year, Marshall choreographed and directed a partially staged *Mama Mia!* at the Hollywood Bowl.



Laura Bell Bundy and Barrett Foa. Photo by Michael Lamont.

Three of the dancers who worked with Marshall on *Mama Mia!* return in the ensemble for *Sweet Charity*. Two of the dancers took time during the final rehearsal day to talk about *Sweet Charity*, the world of dancing in musical theater, and working with Marshall again.

Both Ashley Matthews and Angeline Mirenda started with ballet, credit that classical dance training with giving them a foundation and still regularly take ballet class. Both found the confines of ballet restrictive and migrated into jazz dance and singing, finding their passion in musical theatre.

Describing Marshall's approach, Matthews noted, "She walks into the studio prepared with choreography and knows what she wants, but is open to feedback and evolves her ideas with what she sees once the dancers start moving."

"As the choreographer and also as the director, the choreography is cohesive with her overall vision," Mirenda remarked. Both dancers agreed that such cohesion was possible with a choreographer and director who are in sync, but both had experience with situations where there was a disconnect between the choreographer's movement and the director's concept.

Asked to describe the dances that emerged for *Sweet Charity*, Merinda responded that her strongest impression for *Sweet Charity* as well as for *Mama Mia!* was that the dance was "always narrative driven." Matthews concurred, "It is never too much or too little, and perhaps deceptive because it is always in service of the story being told."

A similar focus on serving the material and a commitment to returning to the elements that defined the original *Reprise* was emphasized by Seligson in describing the two year process for launching *Reprise 2.0*.

"Our focus remains on the material, Broadway classics that have never been seen in L.A. or haven't been seen for a long time with the orchestra onstage, top flight professionals, costumes, but minimal sets so the music, singing, dancing and book are center stage."

Marshall echoed a similar sentiment in her approach to *Sweet Charity*. "Some of Broadway's greats were behind the original Broadway show which drew on Federico Fellini's film *Nights of Cabiria*," Marshall noted. "For Broadway, Neil Simon did the book, Cy Coleman did the music, Dorothy Fields did the on-target lyrics and then Bob Fosse directed and choreographed."

Marshall also confirmed that the *Reprise 2.0* version of *Sweet Charity* would not be a recreation of or homage to Fosse's version or his distinctive choreography.



Terron Brooks and the ensemble in *Sweet Charity*. Photo by Michael Lamont.

At the end of the rehearsal process and just before the first run-through, both dancers agreed that Marshall brought her own moves to this dance-centric musical and both agreed that for those who know Fosse's choreography for the show, there are some sly references without actually replicating Fosse's distinctive style. "Some of the moves may simply live inside that music," Matthews suggested.

Looking ahead, the other two offerings in this return season include another dance-filled musical *Victor/Victoria* in September with *Grand Hotel—the Musical* in October.

In trying to present live musical theater in a city dominated by film, tv, and popular music Reprise 2.0 is a lot like *Sweet Charity*'s lead character facing tough times in a tough town in a tough profession, but fighting its way toward the sunshine.

UCLA's Freud Playhouse, Macgowan Hall, 245 Charles E. Young Drive East, Westwood; Wed., June 20, then Tues.-Fri., 8 p.m., Sat., 2 & 8 p.m., Sun., 2 & 7 p.m., thru Sun., July 1, \$75-\$110, \$30 students. www.reprise2.org.

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