Cultural Daily

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Polar Opposites: Fun Home and Something Rotten!

David Sheward · Wednesday, May 20th, 2015

Two of the biggest contenders for the 2015 Tony Award for Best Musical are polar opposites, but they demonstrate that when theater practitioners are playing at the top of their game, the results can be sublime whether the content is serious or silly. *Fun Home* is a jagged memory piece about a deeply dysfunctional family while *Something Rotten!* is a screwy satire skewering Shakespeare as well as the conventions of musical comedy. The former will break your heart while the latter will break your funny bone.

Fun Home was a hit during its limited run Off-Broadway at the Public Theater last season, winning almost every possible Best Musical accolade, including the Lortel, the Outer Critics Circle and the New York Drama Critics Circle awards. Based on Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir, the musical takes a zig-zag tour through Bechdel's childhood, focusing on the impact her coming out as a lesbian had on her family, particularly on her closeted gay father. Not exactly what you'd expect from a musical, but Lisa Kron's compassionate book and witty lyrics and Jeanine Tesori's rich music make the potentially intense tale warm, insightful, and, when appropriate, funny.

Judy Kuhn, Oscar Williams, Zell Steele Morrow, Sydney Lucas, and Michael Cerveris in Fun Home
Credit: Joan Marcus

While a successful commercial engagement on Broadway will prove challenging, *Home* has become even an even deeper experience in its new environment. Ironically, it's also become more intimate even though it's now playing a much bigger house. At the Circle in the Square, the audience surrounds the action, so the performers seem even more like a real family sharing their secrets. Director Sam Gold and set designer David Zinn have adapted the action from the Public's revolving proscenium to the Circle's oval by employing trap doors to rise and lower furniture like figures in memory.

The cast is almost entirely in tact from the Off-Broadway run. Michael Cerveris and Judy Kuhn have deepened their portrayals of the repressed parents while Beth Malone seems more of a central voice setting the memories in motion as the adult Alison. Eleven-year-old Sydney Lucas still brings multiple layers to her Small Alison and Emily Skeggs captures the awkwardness of first love as the college-age iteration of the heroine.

While *Fun Home* wants to make you feel and think, *Something Rotten!* only wants to make you laugh and it succeeds like gangbusters. Written by a trio of Broadway neophytes, John O'Farrell and brothers Wayne and Karey Kirkpatrick, this lampoon lovingly sends up every musical as well

as every Elizabethan comedy, tragedy or history you could possibly think of (I filled three pages of a legal pad trying to keep up with all the references and finally gave up.)

Brad Oscar and Brian d'Arcy James in *Something Rotten!*
Credit: Joan Marcus

Brothers Nick and Nigel Bottom want to take the 17th century stage by storm, but a white-hot rival named Shakespeare is stealing the spotlight. Nick goes to a soothsayer (Nostradamus's brother, Thomas, get it?) to find out what audiences of the future will crave and it's musicals. So the siblings stage the first-ever tuner while the Bard attempts to ruin it. It all sounds like an extended *Carol Burnett Show* sketch or that episode of *Gilligan's Island* where castaways put on a musical version of *Hamlet*, but it's brilliantly fleshed out by the authors and staged riotously and tightly by Casey Nicholaw.

The book gets weak in the second act when the initial premise runs out of steam, but comes on strong with the Bottom brothers' climactic mock musical "Omelette," which will go down in Broadway history along with "Springtime for Hitler" from *The Producers* as one of the funniest shows-within-a-show ever. The cast of Broadway veterans constantly delights, with Brian d'Arcy James commandingly klutzy as Nick, John Cariani adorably nebbishy as Nigel, Heidi Blickenstaff and Kate Reinders endearingly clever as their respective ladies, Christine Borle rock-star sexy as the Bard, and reliable clowns Brad Oscar, Peter Bartlett, Brooks Ashmanskas, and Gerry Vichi cutting up uproariously.

Fun Home: Opened April 19 for an open run. Circle In the Square, 1633 Broadway, NYC. Tue., 7 p.m.; Wed.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: one hour and 45 mins. with no intermission; $75—$150. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

Something Rotten!: Opened April 22 for an open run. St. James Theatre, 246 W. 44th St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. $15.95—$142. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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