

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Season-End Musicals: Too Much and Just Enough

David Sheward · Monday, May 29th, 2023

Several musicals have opened at the tail-end of the 2022-23 Broadway/Off-Broadway theater season. Some are ambitious and have bitten off more than they could chew, while others want nothing more than to crack some jokes and entertain us. Both *New York, New York* at the St. James and *White Girl in Danger*, a co-production of Vineyard Theater and Second Stage, recently closed at the latter's Tony Kiser Off-Broadway theater, fall into the first category. They both include just about everything including the kitchen sink in their separate examinations of post-WWII life in the big city and the marginalization of African-American characters in mass media, particularly soap operas. But even though this pair of tuners are overstuffed, there is much to relish in their packed programming.



Clyde Alves, Colton Ryan, and Anna Uzele in *New York, New York*.

Credit: Paul Kolnik

The Playbill for *New York, New York* lists the show as being “inspired by” the 1977 flick of the same name. That Martin Scorsese opus wasn’t an ode to the glories of the titular burg, as the stage musical ascribes to be. The movie was basically a weepy, detailing the rocky courtship, marriage and break-up of volatile bandleader Jimmy Doyle (Robert DeNiro) and scrappy chanteuse Francine Evans (Liza Minnelli). The new book by David Thompson and Sharon Washington loads on three

more main plotlines and provides a racial twist to the prime story. Francine (charismatic Anna Uzele) is now African-American. Her romance with Irish-American Jimmy (enchanting Colton Ryan) is freighted with racial tension as they combat discrimination in 1946.

In addition, there are the struggles of African-American jazz musician Jesse Webb (dynamic John Clay III), Cuban gay bongo player Mateo Diaz (energetic Angel Sigala) and Jewish refugee violinist Alex Mann (moving Ben Davis). The latter is connected to the story because he gets fiddle lessons from Francine's landlady, Madame Veltri (Emily Skinner, overcoming melodramatic excesses in the script) who's got her own tale of woe. It's as if the creative team were checking off a list of diversity and inclusion.



The cast of *New York, New York*.

Credit: Paul Kolnik

The gorgeous score is a combination of John Kander-Fred Ebb trunk songs and new material by Kander with lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda. So the book and the score are something of a hodgepodge. Director-choreographer Susan Stroman is not quite able to weave all these disparate elements together into a cohesive whole, but there are many isolated stand-out moments. A sizzling tap number atop a skyscraper under construction is fun, even though it appears stuck in the middle of the action for no strong reason. Stroman's staging involving chorus members holding up letters to spell out such locations as Central Park and Grand Central Station is clever. (Beowulf Boritt's elaborate and detailed settings create the perfect 1940s environment as do Donna Zakowska's dynamite, period-perfect costumes.) Francine's first Broadway role is excitingly staged. Perhaps the most enchanting number is the simplest as Ryan's Jimmy sweetly delivers "A Quiet Thing" from *Flora the Red Menace* in velvety soft tones reminiscent of Harry Connick Jr. and Michael Buble.

While *New York, New York* may not be equal to the sum of its many parts, it's still a giant-sized box of Broadway delights, particularly the enthralling finale when the orchestra rises out of the pit on an elevated platform with Uzele and Ryan spiritedly putting across the title tune. Of course, the audience knows all the words and sings rapturously along.



Tarra Conner Jones and Latoya Edwards in *White Girl in Danger*.

Credit: Marc J. Franklin

White Girl in Danger, Michael R. Jackson's riotous follow-up to his Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Strange Loop*, has even more going on than *New York, New York*. A piercingly satiric send-up of soaps, *White Girl* has more stories than the Freedom Tower. We're inside a TV drama universe ruled over by the Great White Writer. Blackground player Keesha Gibbs (devilishly funny LaToya Edwards) longs to move out of Police Violence Storytime and join the main players of AllWhite, a Peyton Place-like center of debauchery and scandal (that allusion shows you how old the critic is). Accompanying Keesha on her upwardly mobile trek is her down-to-earth mother Nell (the amazing Tarra Conner Jones), who graduates from lunch lady to school nurse to assistant district attorney as she follows her daughter up the racially tinged ladder of success.

The premise is perfectly valid and timely and Jackson's score contains many rock-driven, catchy tunes including the '70s-charged title song. Jackson's book also has many laughs and sharp insight into African-American and white power dynamics, but there's just too many tropes and schticks to keep track of. We go from high school trauma to courtroom clashes to political elections to *Dynasty*-like catfights to horror films with side trips to slavery scenarios. Director Lileana Blain-Cruz manages to keep the multiple plots moving, aided by Adam Rigg's versatile set.



Alex Newell in *Shucked*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman

Meanwhile, *Shucked* (at the Nederlander) offers us a heaping helping of hospitality and plenty of yucks. That's all and in this case, it's enough. Set in the mythical rural paradise of Cobb County, somewhere Down South, this hootenanny of hilarity is thin on story but heavy on puns and one-liners. The plot centers on a failed corn crop, blighted romance, and a visiting con man who is less honorable than Professor Harold Hill. In Robert Horn's laugh-crammed book, this premise is secondary to the cascade of jokes, only two of which I had heard before—one was originally from Redd Foxx, the other a chestnut courtesy of Rodney Dangerfield. Just a random sample of the more original gags: "I wonder what people in China call their good plates" and "I remember when we played sandcastles with Grandma...until Grandpa hid her urn." Even though most of these gems are non-sequiturs, there's a genuine giggle every few seconds. Brandy Clark and Shane McAnally's score is equally mirth-inducing.

Director Jack O'Brien does his customary brilliant work of keeping the tempo at the right comic pace. The young cast are all masters of timing and the non-binary performer Alex Newell is a stand-out as a sassy whiskey peddler belting out an anthem of independence. Ashley D. Kelley and Grey Henson are sweetly sincere as the narrators. Caroline Innerbichler, Andrew Durand and John Behlmann sparkle as the three points of a romantic triangle and Kevin Cahoon garners guffaws doing the hayseed shtick. *Shucked* is totally unrealistic—it imagines a rural community with interracial families peacefully coexisting with NRA enthusiasts—but that's its point. The show is a silly fantasy, imagining an idealistic utopia where everyone is accepted. So different from our current divided nation. A nice way to spend an evening.



Will Swenson and chorus in *A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical*.

Credit: Julieta Cervantes

Finally, I caught up with *A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical* at the Broadhurst. Like most jukebox bio-musicals, the tuner is an excuse to play the subject's song catalogue to an audience of rabid fans. Anthony McCarten's book hits the usual bullet points—rise to fame, troubled marriages, conflicted and reflective old age—and provides intros to the smash hits. All is staged smoothly by Michael Mayer. Will Swenson does a fantastic job of limning the young Diamond and Mark Jacoby is soulful and moving as his elder counterpart. Robyn Hurder provides the necessary emotional support and dynamite dance moves as Diamond's put-on spouse. Like *Shucked*, *Noise* doesn't ask much of us except to sit back and relax. *NY, NY* and *White Girl* ask too much, but they do offer some rewards.

New York, New York: Opened April 26 for an open run. St. James Theater, 246 W. 44th St., NYC. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission.

White Girl in Danger: April 10—May 21. Vineyard Theater and Second Stage at the Tony Kiser Theater, 305 W. 43rd St., NYC. Running time: two hours and 50 mins. including intermission.

Shucked: Opened April 4 for an open run. Nederlander Theater, 208 W. 41st St., NYC. Running time: two hours and 15 mins. including intermission. [Ticketmaster](#).

A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical: Opened Dec. 4, 2022 for an open run. Broadhurst Theater, 235 W. 44th St., NYC. Running time: two hours and 15 mins. including intermission. [Ticketmaster](#).

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