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Summer Musicals: Band and Pretty Woman

David Sheward · Thursday, August 30th, 2018

The public expects much less of summer movies than the Oscar-bait released during the fall and winter. Now it's hot out and, to paraphrase Cyndi Lauper, audiences just want to have fun. Broadway has fallen under a similar spell this year with a pair of lightweight, warm-weather tuners opening during these usually dormant months for the New York stage. *Gettin' the Band Back Together* at the Belasco and *Pretty Woman* at the Nederlander, are good for a giggle, but not much else. Both have low-calorie humor and are fantasies of romance and empowerment, but *Band* fully commits to its goofiness while *Woman* is a cynical retread of a popular film without a spark of originality.

Manu Narayan, Jay Klaitz, Paul Whitty, Sawyer Nunes, and Mitchell Jarvis in *Gettin' the Band Back Together*.
Credit: Joan Marcus

Band boasts of its rare status of not being derived from a movie, play, or the songbook of a popular musician or group. In fact, a warm-up performer informs us of such before the curtain rises. Producer-Co-Author Ken Davenport handled this chore during previews. This is just one of the show's unconventional ploys to brand the event as an audience-friendly party. T-shirts are shot into the crowd, cast members hand out snacks during intermission, and audience members are called on stage to participate in a rousing musical finale. Like many of Davenport's previous populist ventures such as *Altar Boyz* and the 2011 *Godspell* revival, *Band* is like a huge St. Bernard, bounding into the audience's collective lap, begging for love.

Developed by Davenport and a 12-member improvisational collective known as "The Grundleshotz" (with "additional material" credited to Sarah Saltzberg), the book is a recycling of familiar plot tropes. Just-turned-40 Mitch Papadopoulos (bland but game Mitchell Jarvis) is fired from his Wall Street perch and forced to return to the suburban New Jersey home of his widowed mom Sharon (equally game and anything but bland Marilu Henner, late of TV's *Taxi*). Through a series of ridiculous events, Mitch must reunite his high-school garage band Juggernaut in order to save his mom's foreclosed house. Don't ask.

Of course, all of Mitch's former bandmates—math teacher Bart, cop Sully and dermatologist Robbie—are unhappy in their work and/or romantic lives and find their old zing in rocking out with their buds. Of course Mitch's old flame Dani is single and lonely. Does all work out in the end? You guess, but at least *Band* has the sense to kid itself and poke fun at all these cliches.

There are so many holes in the story, it resembles a hunk of Swiss cheese—Mitch didn't have any savings at all? But the show exists in a wacky alternative universe with its own internal logic. If you are willing to suspend your disbelief and accept the objective of just enjoying a chuckle or two, it's a pleasant enough two and half hours. John Rando injects the right go-for-broke energy in his staging, aided by Derek McLane's cartoonish sets, Ken Billington's rock-concert lighting, and Emily Rebholz's appropriately tacky costumes.

To this viewer, there was just as many groaners as on-target guffaws. In the plus column are Brandon Williams' deadpan villainous real-estate grabber who is Mitch's rival and Ryan Duncan as a heartbroken lounge singer ("You left the crack pipe in the baby's crib/But I love you anyway"). Thumbs down to a tired rap number at a Jewish wedding and a particularly icky, unfunny song depicting Bart's age-difference liaison with Sharon.

Andy Karl and Samantha Barks in *Pretty Woman*.
Credit: Matthew Murphy

Mark Allen's score contains a fair share of amusing lyrics and tuneful rock parodies. But it's like Sondheim compared to the synthetic pop of Bryan Adams and Jim Vallance's songs for *Pretty Woman*. This stage version of Garry Marshall's 1990 hit film comedy which made Julia Roberts a star is a Cinderella story set in a movie-world Hollywood, celebrating money, materialism, room service, and, oh yeah, true love. Street hooker Vivian (delightful Samantha Barks) is hired by lonely tycoon Edward Lewis (reliably charming Andy Karl) to act as his date and bedmate during a week of business meetings. Naturally, after some second-act misunderstandings, their business arrangement turns into honest amour. The principal gimmick of the film was seeing gritty Vivian ripping apart the pretensions of ultra ritzy Beverly Hills and Rodeo Drive (satirized on stage with verve by set designer David Rockwell and costume designer Gregg Barnes). The same ploys are employed but the *My Fair Lady* parallels get tired after the third time.

The main problem here is the fresh-faced Barks is totally unbelievable as a tough prostitute and the book by the late Marshall and J.F. Lawton (who wrote the original screenplay) downplays the desperation of her profession. As written, a smart, self-determined woman like Vivian would not end up selling herself on Hollywood Boulevard. She'd probably be running a high-class bordello. The rationale for her sex-worker status is pretty lame—a string of bad boyfriends. Edward is similarly underwritten with flimsy motivation as to why he has commitment problems, though Karl does his level best to fill in the blanks. The powerfully-voiced Orfeh (Karl's real-life wife) as Vivian's pal and fellow lady of the evening and Eric Anderson as an omnipresent narrator provide much-needed support. Jason Danieley is stuck with the obligatory nasty corporate lawyer role (We gotta have somebody to hiss.)

As always, Jerry Mitchell's direction and choreography moves the story along at a rapid clip and show off a chorus full of talented triple threats (particularly Tommy Bracco as an acrobatic bellboy and Allison Blackwell as an operatic diva.) But it's difficult to care about these thin main characters.

Not every show has to be Tony Award material to be worth seeing and enjoying. We don't except every summer yuckfest or the latest installment of a superhero franchise to garner a shelfful of Oscars. Both *Band* and *Woman* are silly, easy shows, whether they are worth Broadway prices is up to you and your pocketbook.

Gettin' the Band Back Together: Opened Aug. 13 for an open run. Belasco Theatre, 111 W. 44th St. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2:30pm & 7:30pm. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. $39.50—$169.50. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

Pretty Woman: Opened Aug. 16 for an open run. Nederlander Theatre, 208 W. 41st St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. $99—$249. (877) 250-2929. www.ticketmaster.com.

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