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Tony Danza Throws Off Honeymoon in Vegas

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 28th, 2015

The first 30 minutes of *Honeymoon in Vegas*, based on the 1992 film comedy, are among the best in any musical now on Broadway. The amazing Rob McClure, who dazzled us a few seasons back with his title performance in the uneven *Chaplin*, opens the show with "I Love Betsy," a peppy, funny number with zestful music and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown. With the aide of Gary Griffin's sharp direction and Denis Jones's engaging choreography, McClure establishes his character Jack, a shlubby but amiable guy about to buy an engagement ring for his girlfriend of five years. Then we meet the lady in question (the sparkling Brynn O'Malley), and, in a clever flashback sequence, Jack's late mother (the hilarious Nancy Opel), who extracted a deathbed promise from the hero never to marry. Despite his mom's pull from the grave, Jack impulsively flies to Vegas with Betsy for a quickie wedding. (I guess they can both get time off from work without a problem.)

So far, so good. Conflict is introduced, comedy expectations are high, all's right with the show.

But then Tony Danza enters as high-stakes gambler Tommy Korman and everything grinds to a halt.

The slick Korman immediately falls in love with Betsy—she resembles his late wife—and schemes to steal her from the nebbishy Jack. Danza is not right for this important role, and it's not just his quavering tenor, though that doesn't help much. In order for the show to work, Korman must be an attractive shark. We've got to believe this charming, ruthless con artist will stop at nothing to get what he wants and we've got to love him while he's doing it. Danza is not that guy. Despite some gray hairs, he's still that lovable lug from *Taxi* and *Who's the Boss* and he doesn't possess the musical or dramatic skills to convince us otherwise.

Tony Danza (far left) and Rob McClure (standing, right) in Honeymoon in Vegas
Credit: Joan Marcus

Luckily we have McClure, who combines the zany timing of Nathan Lane and the boyish charm of Matthew Broderick. His Jack is one of the highlights of the season and, if there is any justice, it will propel him to the front ranks of Broadway stars. His pliable features are like a roadmap of riotous reactions. From deadpan responses to expressions of pure joy when things are going Jack's way to those of terror when they're not, McClure's mug runs the proverbial gamut. (He even gets

laughs just by saying “Please don’t do that” to a spy sent by Tommy to seduce him.) Plus he dances with style and sings with feeling and power; there is nothing he can’t do.

It’s too bad Danza throws this *Honeymoon* off balance. There is so much to like here. The book by Andrew Bergman (who wrote the original screenplay) has genuine guffaws and is well-structured while Brown’s score is among his best with memorable melodies and intricate lyrics (my favorites involved comparing the hookers in Vegas to those in Jersey City). David Josefberg is delightfully sleazy doubling as a smarmy singer and an Elvis impersonator. George Merrick, Catherine Ricafont, Matthew Saldivar, and Raymond J. Lee bring juice to smaller parts. Griffin’s direction, Anna Louizos’ sets, Brian Hemesath’s costumes, and Howell Binkley’s lighting are full of surprises. Amidst his high-caliber colleagues, Danza is strictly a lounge act and doesn’t belong in the big room.

Opened Jan. 15 for an open run. Nederlander Theatre, 208 W. 41st 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. $69-$199. (800) 653-8000 or www.ticketmaster.com.

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