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On the Town Is a Helluva Broadway Show

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 12th, 2014

On the Town, the iconic musical following three sailors pursuing romance while on a 24-hour leave in wartime Gotham, has had a strange life since its 1944 premiere. That watershed original staging marked the Broadway debuts of a quartet of talents whose collective influence on the American musical has been nothing less than seismic: composer Leonard Bernstein, director-choreographer Jerome Robbins, and book authors-lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green, who also played leading roles. A weird hybrid of the sophisticated sensibilities of Bernstein and Robbins and the show-biz sketch humor of Comden and Green, *Town* was a smash-hit celebration of youthful exuberance having one last fling before facing the perils of war. But the 1949 MGM film version starring Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra scrapped most of Bernstein's complex score, replacing it with Hollywood pablum. Revivals in 1971 and 1998 did not strike the right balance between high and low culture, received mixed notices and achieved only brief runs.

In its latest incarnation at the newly renamed Lyric, John Rando, who won a Tony for his outlandish staging of *Urinetown*, has restored the zany cartoon aspect of the show. The performances are as mostly broad as the characters' names—Claire DeLoone, Pitkin W. Bridgework, Lucy Schmeeler, Professor Figment—but there is also just the right hint of sentimentality amid the shenanigans. For starters, the show opens with the "Star-Spangled Banner" rather than the traditional overture. Beowulf Borritt's comic-strip sets and projections, Jason Lyons' primary-colored lighting and Jess Goldstein's Technicolor costumes create a kiddie-fantasy New York in which the sailors and their girls cavort.

Jay Armstrong Johnson and Alysha Umphress in *On the Town*. Photo: Joan Marcus

But the biggest contribution towards blending the satiric with the humane is made by Tony Yazbeck as Gaby, the lovelorn serviceman. While his pals Ozzie (a comically macho Clyde Alves) and Chip (a sweetly naïve Jay Armstrong) make sexual conquests, Gaby hunts for a more idealization goal—the illusive Ivy Smith (the gorgeous Megan Fairchild, principal dancer with the New York City Ballet), Miss Turnstiles for June. He sees her poster on the subway and immediately falls in love. As singer, dancer, and actor, Yazbeck captures Gaby's intense longing for amorous connection, perfectly meshing virility and vulnerability. His intense rendition of "Lonely Town" accompanied by the chorus stationed throughout the theater, is achingly real. When paired with the magnificent Fairchild in choreographer Joshua Bergasse's extended ballet sequences, *Town* soars like an eagle. Completing the lead female contingent are the deliriously high-brow Elizabeth Stanley as a sex-mad anthropologist and Alysha Umphress as scat-singing cab driver. She really cooks on "I Can Cook, Too," a double-entrendre laden ode to the character's

kitchen and bedroom skills.

The always hilarious Jackie Hoffman pops up in multiple roles including Ivy's alcoholic voice teacher, an irate old lady, and a pair of put-upon club singers. If she doesn't get a Tony nomination, there is no justice. There are also riotously effective contributions from a deep-voiced Philip Boykin, a pompous Michael Rupert, an antic Allison Guinn, and a versatile Stephen DeRosa. Altogether a wonderful *Town*.

Opened Oct. 16 for an open run. Lyric Theatre, 213 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Thu.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. $46.25-$157.25. (800) 745-8000 or www.ticketmaster.com.

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

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