Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Two Musicals of Chance and Choice

Sylvie · Wednesday, December 16th, 2015

Actors pushing sets around? Moving furniture?

No, it's not new, but recent productions have driven this practice to new heights. It happens in *Guys & Dolls* at The Wallis (reviewed last week), it happens again in *If/Then* at the Pantages, and it achieves an apotheosis of sorts in *The Bridges of Madison County* at The Ahmanson. Are actors more affordable than stage hands…?

Okay, so this is a bit of a back door entrance to some comments about the two latest musical theatre entries filling major Los Angeles stages. Both shows are imperfect and yet both offer enough stimulation in their component parts to merit some attention.

Starting with ***If/Then*** at The Pantages, this is another daring attempt at an existential musical by Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey — the same team that gave us the memorable 2009 *Next To Normal*, a musical about, of all things, bipolar disorder. I remember thinking, how can one fashion a musical out of such a downer, only to be astonished by how profoundly affecting it turned out to be — delicately yet unflinchingly grasping the effect of mental illness on the afflicted person and her family. I wasn't alone. It won a Pulitzer.

Despite this pedigree, however, Kitt and Yorkey's latest experiment, *If/Then,* is an even more ambitious but far less successful piece, largely because it bites off so much more than it can chew. Heavily advertised as a show set "where choice and chance collide," *If/Then* attempts, by magical bifurcation, to show us the possible lives of Elizabeth, known variously as Liz and Beth, the two women-in-one (performed by Idina Menzel) who are affected by chance and choice in very different ways. (Are you lost yet?)

No spoilers allowed beyond this point or, to be candid, even possible, since the distinction between the roads taken and not is exceedingly blurred. As startling as this effort is, *If/Then* is a flawed attempt at a complex idea that is sustained to some degree by Kitt's score and Yorkey's lyrics, but not by Yorkey's book, which creates terminal confusion. The production has a hard-working cast, but, above all, it benefits from the uniqueness of Menzel, whose dedicated fans, judging from the clamor, were all in attendance at the opening.

Parts of the show — the music and the songs, which are exacting if not memorable — work well enough, as long as you don't delve too deeply into whose life they're dealing with. This much we know: One woman is a successful city planner whose ratings on the upwardly mobile scale are headed only up. The other? Not doing so well, faced with events (and choices) more difficult to

sort out and that deliver bittersweet results. But it's hard to feel anything for someone you spend so much time trying to merely identify. The connecting thread running through the show is the family of friends that in today's world steps in where the absence or distance of traditional family provides the void. Outstanding in the company is LaChanze as Kate, reprising the role she played on Broadway as the vivid girlfriend and lesbian kindergarden teacher who best understands Liz… or Beth or both. I'll never know.

Idina Menzel and James Snyder in *If/Then* at The Pantages Theatre. Photo by Joan Marcus.

Either way, it hardly matters because this show is really all about Menzel. Her high-pitched voice makes her an admirably iconoclastic singer, while her speaking voice can often be achingly wispy. Something about that combination, added to her secretive eyes, square-jawed features and slight overbite, create an inscrutable persona with a mildly distancing beauty that's at once elusive and captivating.

Mark Wendland's set, backed by giant projections of maps of different areas of New York City designed by Peter Nigrini and Dan Scully, has a few too many moving parts, including a catwalk (reminiscent of his set for *Next To Normal*) and ambulating locales. That's where the actors come in doing their heavy lifting, pushing and pulling, and opening and folding umbrellas at the fairy tale park this group of friends frequents.

Even if the elements the writer and composer and director Michael Greif were going after run a little too long and don't quite coalesce, the ambition of the enterprise is intriguing. It's bold enough to mostly hold our interest. And since the heart of this show at all times is Menzel, who is given every opportunity to shine — and mostly does — the inclination with the missteps is to forgive them and move on. But the muddle is a muddle that nothing but a real rewrite will fix.

Idina Menzel in *If/Then* at The Pantages Theatre. Photo by Joan Marcus.

The Bridges of Madison County at The Ahmanson Theatre also is a piece about the crossroads of chance and choice, but this time in the context of an overwritten love story. The more direct and predictable plot, freely amplified by book writer Marsha Norman from the 1992 Robert James Waller novel, tells the story of Francesca, an Italian war bride who flees the postwar disruption of her native Naples by marrying a stolid if upstanding American soldier from Iowa.

Like it or not, she figures out how to make a life and a family in the isolating sprawl of the Midwestern farmlands — until her quiet accommodation is forever shattered when a *National Geographic* photographer walks in the door asking for directions to the Roseman Bridge.

Elizabeth Stanley & Andrew Samonsky in *The Bridges of Madison County* at The Ahmanson Theatre. Photo by Matthew Murphy.

It you haven't read the book or seen the movie, which starred Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep, you're in a tiny minority. The overfamiliarity with the love affair at the core of this story (and musical) could be a liability. Certainly some of Norman's expansion feels like filler intended to stretch a pretty thin plotline. We appreciate getting to know something more about this farming family and a few of their neighbors — such as nosy Marge (the clever and talented Mary

Callahan), who turns out to be a good soul and protective friend to Francesca. Mostly, however, these characters remain adorning stereotypes.

What primarily distinguishes the production are Jason Robert Brown's lyrics and semi-operatic score, and the soaring performances by, and chemistry between, the two leads: a quietly dazzling Elizabeth Stanley as Francesca and the big-voiced Andrew Samonsky as photographer Robert Kincaid.

While his music dips into several other musical styles, the semi-operatic part is a surprise because, beyond dated operettas, it is so rarely found in musical theatre. The totality and variety of the score and the exquisite emotion expressed in the delicate lyrics ("Wondering," "Falling Into You,") are undoubtedly what earned Brown his Tony Award. And it certainly doesn't hurt that he'll be at the podium for the entire Ahmanson run. But if it all works so well in this iteration, it is in large part because both Samonsky and Stanley have the vocal range and the acting chops to deliver the goods.

Andrew Samonsky and Elizabeth Stanley in *The Bridges of Madison County*, Ahmanson Theatre. Photo by Matthew Murphy.

Both are equally persuasive as unexpected lovers, and the emotion between them is so effortlessly believable, the songs so well phrased, that they overcome any cynical claims at the improbability of a four-day affair triggering the jolting lifelong effect that it has on them both. Right time, right place? We go to the theatre for many reasons and wanting to believe in the possibility of such a transforming experience is certainly one of them.

On other levels, the news is less good. While director Bartlett Sher must be credited with giving the production much of its emotional heft (his staging is "recreated" here by Tyne Rafaeli), the same cannot be said about some of his other decisions. Michael Yeargan's scenic design, expressive of the wide plains of Iowa, with its partial realism, lone tree and big skies, also finds actors in an almost ludicrous scramble to move furniture and push around kitchens and staircases. It's one thing to be inventive, but not to the point of such total distraction.

Under Donald Holder's lighting, the Iowan fields look utterly serene, just as Catherine Zuber's slightly dowdy costumes and David Brian Brown's wigs and hair styles plant us firmly in a 1960s that, frankly, feels more like the 1930s, untouched as it seems by the turmoil of the Vietnam War or the youthful rebellion raging in so many other parts of the country. The only mention of hippies comes from Marge, who may not even know exactly what it means.

l-r, Dave Thomas Brown, Elizabeth Stanley, Cullen R. Titmas and Caitlin Houlahan in *The Bridges of Madison County* at The Ahmanson Theatre. Photo by Matthew Murphy.

Once Francesca makes her decision to stick with the family the show's momentum falters. Except for "When I'm Gone," a lovely sequence showing us the passage of time by marking the deaths of Marge's husband Charlie (David Hess) and Francesca's husband Bud (Cullen R. Titmas), all that remains is to wrap things up. The kids are grown, son Michael (Dave Thomas Brown) graduates med school, daughter Carolyn (Caitlin Houlahan) is married and a Mom. (Vietnam War? Hippies? Not in this pastoral wilderness.) You'd think that, after all that, Francesca might try to find Robert again. But fate has a different plan and it takes just a little too long to get her to resign herself to

aging alone as gracefully as she can in this nowhereland Iowa.

Chance and choice have done their job again, faulty though it may be.

Top Image: Idina Menzel and the cast of If/Then *at the Pantages Theatre. Photo by Joan Marcus.*

WHAT: *If/Then*

WHERE: Pantages Theatre, 6233 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90028.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Saturdays, 8pm; Wednesdays, Saturdays, Sundays 2pm; special matinees Dec. 24 & 31; special evening shows Dec. 27 & Jan. 3; NO performances Dec.25 & Jan. 1. Ends Jan 3.

HOW: Tickets start at $35 (subject to change). More ticket information available at www.HollywoodPantages.com/IfThen.

WHAT: *The Bridges of Madison County*

WHERE: Ahmanson Theatre at the Music Center, 135 N. Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturday, 2 & 8pm; Sundays, I & 6:30pm. No performance Dec. 24, 25 or Jan. 1. No 6:30pm performance Jan. 17. Added 8pm shows Dec. 21 & 28 and 2pm matinee Jan. 14. Ends Jan. 17.

HOW: Tickets $25-$130 (subject to change), available at 213.972.4400, online at www.centertheatregroup.org or in person at the Center Theatre Group box office at the Music Center.

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