

# Theater: 'Aladdin's' Old-Fashioned Charm; McNally's Dated 'Mothers And Sons'

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**ALADDIN** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**MOTHERS AND SONS** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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**NEW AMSTERDAM THEATRE**

Once upon a time, animated films were for kids. Sure people knew Pinocchio and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs were amazing achievements, but if you didn't drag a kid along to the cinema, you felt a little funny. Those days are long gone. And now the Broadway musicals based on animated films are proving to be far more than kiddie fare as well. The Lion King alone set new standards for puppetry and what it can achieve on the stage. (And precious few shows employing puppetry have come in its wake -- Lorne Michaels, call me because you're sitting on a goldmine!)

Now we have Aladdin. The feature film was one of the best of the resurgent Disney, a boy-centric adventure -- unlike so many others -- with action and humor. It's become a very winning stage show that is unquestionably kid friendly. But it also has the charm and pizzazz of the best musical comedies from the 1950s: this is a lot closer to the Hope & Crosby Road movies than, say, Annie. Adults with or without kids should scarf it up. It's got a wholesome sexiness in its leads, solid laughs and a pleasingly retro look that sets just the right tone. And it has a genie.

Anyone who has seen Aladdin will tell you that Genie (James Monroe Iglehart) steals the show. Not really, because the show is his from the very start. He is the narrator and centerpiece of the opening number "Arabian Nights," delivers the literally show-stopping "Friend Like Me" towards the end of Act One and leads things off again in Act Two with "Prince Ali." Iglehart does the seemingly impossible task of topping Robin Williams from the movie, right down to silly pop-cultural references (Oprah! Let's Make A Deal!) and a manic insistence that you will be entertained. You're in good hands the moment he's on stage and you immediately realize pretty much anything goes to get a laugh, from jokes about souvenir shopping to snappy exit lines where he hopes you won't miss him too much.

Genie quickly let's us in on the story: Princess Jasmine (Courtney Reed) is the sole daughter of the Sultan (Clifton Davis, a genial presence). He won't force an arranged marriage on her and none of the self-centered princes who expect their bride to do as they're told will do. Meanwhile, the scheming Jafar (Jonathan Freeman) wants to keep her single so he can steal power for himself. Enter Aladdin (Adam Jacobs), a poor orphan (natch) who doesn't have two piastres to rub together (or whatever they use for money in the mythical land of Agrabah). How can he hope to woo a princess except with pluck, charm, his dashing good lucks and a catchy song or two? And a magical lamp with a genie that offers three wishes wouldn't hurt either?

This plot -- unaltered -- might easily have formed the basis for a musical on Broadway 50 or 60 years ago. For example, Aladdin's friends are jokey sidekicks with Borscht belt sensibilities. If one of them says someone should "hum us a bar," the hungry one (a vivid Brian Gonzales) is sure to interject, "Did someone say hummus?"

It's funny! Jonathan Schwartz is goofy as the scaredy-cat and Brandon O'Neil fine as the astringent one. Jasmine's hand-maidens have attitude and sass and don't mind noticing that Aladdin is darn good-looking. (Though this is the Arabian Nights, not the Caribbean Nights, so I'm not sure Josh Marquette's choice of hair weaves works here.) Jafar (Freeman) and his sidekick (a funny Don Darryl Rivera) have very amusing banter -- down to making time for maniacal laughs -- and their plotting often takes place towards the lip of the stage while scene changes take place behind a curtain. If it was any more enjoyably old-fashioned, the theater would be lit by candles.

Director Casey Nicholaw (The Book Of Mormon) sets just the right tone, though of course he's blessed with the one thing every musical needs: good songs. The tunes from the film (both the ones used and the ones that were cut but are restored here) are all amusing and fun, more proof that Alan Menken and Howard Ashman were indeed one of the great teams of musical theater. (Tim Rice also does his best work outside of Lloyd Webber with the song lyrics he contributes.) Chad Beguelin has a good, loosey-goosey tone for the book and some additional lyrics, though he owes a big debt to the screenwriters of the original film.

There's even a bit of magic with the flying carpet ride set to "A Whole New World." It's a simple and effective stunt that beguiles. However, it doesn't quite take flight emotionally because the song is a duet between Aladdin and Jasmine. Reed as the heroine is the show's weak link. Her voice is sharp and thin on the higher notes, especially whenever she tries to belt, both here and on her other numbers like "These Palace Walls" and "A Million Miles Away." She's quite pretty, of course, but even her acting hits the wrong note: Jasmine comes across as a "princess" as in spoiled and one who is dabbling with concern about others, rather than a spunky character with a mind of her own. With another female love interest, the show would be raised up a notch, but it's far from fatal since this is not Jasmine's show.

Freeman's presence tickles me to no end. He actually created the voice role of Jafar for the 1992 film and yet here he is on stage in 2014, recreating that part and doing it perfectly, even though in the world of voice work I could "play" Aladdin in an animated film but never remotely look the part onstage, much less have the theatrical chops to do it to perfection 20 years later. Hearing his voice and knowing he IS Jafar just makes this show a little more special. As far as I know, no one has ever before created a role in an animated film and then recreated it on Broadway, so store that away for future trivia night competitions. All the secondary roles are fun, with Aladdin's pals shining especially on "High Adventure," a nutty number right in keeping with the show where they run in slow motion on stage (while a servant walks by at regular speed, just for laughs) and do what they can to rescue their pal.

But it's Genie everyone will remember, especially at Tony time when he is an undeniable lock to win Best Supporting Actor in a Musical. Iglehart has a ball but don't think it's a part that just calls for a big, boisterous personality. He sings, he dances, he tells jokes, he emotes and he has to do it all with a wink and a smile. It's the role of a lifetime for Iglehart and he knows it and we know it too. Bob Crowley's sets (with their subtle beauty and pop-up charm), the exotic and colorful costumes of Gregg Barnes and the lighting of Natasha Katz are there doing excellent work throughout, giving Iglehart the launching pad he deserves when for example "Friend Like Me" builds and builds to its ecstatic finale.

Yet the praise shouldn't stop there. The heart and soul of the show -- and appearing in almost every scene -- is Jacobs as Aladdin. Like Reed, he looks like a storybook hero come to life (no street urchin ever had more dazzling teeth and how can he afford a gym membership anyway?). But unlike Reed he sings in a strong and clear and confident voice that is a pleasure to hear. Jacobs also wins the audience over and knows just the right balance to strike in tone and style. Whether he's dancing across the stage romantically with Jasmine or looking winningly befuddled as he's dancing across the stage with Genie, Jacobs is a winner in a part that could easily be bland or too jokey. Iglehart deservedly gets big applause but no one is working harder or more seamlessly than Jacobs.

Sometimes a show is more enjoyable because it doesn't have such grand ambitions. Aladdin wants nothing more than to entertain and please, sending us away with some hummable tunes, some groaners among its endless jokes and some innocently sexy talent on display kicking and dancing their hearts out. In a way, it's Disney's most adult Broadway show yet and all the better for it.

## **MOTHERS AND SONS** \*\* out of \*\*\*\* **GOLDEN THEATRE**

What could be more timely than Tony winner Terrence McNally's new play Mothers And Sons? It features the first legally gay couple on Broadway and they've got an adorable tyke to boot (with the sperm of one, donated eggs and a lesbian friend to carry the baby to term)! The couple is even May-December in their age difference with the younger man (Bobby Steggert) always expecting to raise a family and the older man (Frederick Weller) blind-sided by the idea and thrilled with the result.

And yet, what could be more dated and message-heavy than Terrence McNally's new play Mothers And Sons? It feels more like an excuse for the playwright to get some ideas off his chest than a dramatic work. And it's so determined to deliver that message that characters aren't allowed to live and breathe but must chat away until one or the other feels the need to explode with some pent-up commentary. In the long gone days before creaky TV movies -- when Broadway could support message plays -- Mothers And Sons might have fit right in. Today it looks like an anachronism.

And yet, I feel defensive about this work. McNally is a major playwright and this show stars Tyne Daly, one of the greats. Weller is a strong presence and Steggert is one of theater's brightest talents. It's presented with care by director Sheryl Kaller and performed to the hilt by all involved, with a generous amount of laughs for an audience keyed in to the show's world. I would be astonished if the show had a long run. But I'm even more astonished that with talent like this that the show didn't draw in crowds, at least for the first few months. McNally and Daly and the rest deserve better, even if this work isn't their best. That may be a little contradictory, but you know what I mean.

The 90 minute show without intermission is simplicity itself, perhaps because there is so little really going on here. Cal (Weller) is the former lover/partner/soul mate of Andre, who died of AIDS some twenty years ago. Andre's mother Katharine (Daly) was always a fearsome presence in their lives and she has shown up out of the blue from Dallas, prejudices fully intact. Now that she's alone in the world (her husband has just died) Katharine is desperate to speak to someone who remembers Andre. Maybe she wants to know who to blame for her son being gay, for getting AIDS, for slipping away from her before he slipped away from life, but really the deeper reason is that she misses her son and Cal is the only person left she can talk to about him.

Her excuse for visiting is Andre's diary, which Cal mailed to her. She's never opened it up and neither has Cal and she's trying to return it now. If you don't think someone is going to open the diary and read a passage that will touch and/or amuse us and bring them to tears, then you've never seen a Broadway show. Hovering in the background is Will (Steggert), a writer and full-time house husband who is painfully PC and a little insufferable in his entitlement.

They live in a gorgeous apartment with grand views of Central Park (the fine scenic design is by John Lee Beatty). Sure, Will's relative helped with the down-payment but they're still a wealthy couple of privilege. Cal makes loads of money working in finance, for example. They have a perfect, inquisitive, adorable child named Bud (stiffly played by Grayson Taylor). To top it off, Will is a "struggling" writer just setting out on a career and working on his first novel...but he's already had a short story published in the New Yorker. Good god, that's not a struggling writer, that's a writer who's already reached a pinnacle few ever even imagine. How much more hatefully successful could they be?

Daly comes in as an astringent but fragile presence. The three dance around each other, alternately charming

and annoying and amusing and frustrating and angering one another. It all feels so scattershot and disconnected that you never quite know who is going to crack next. That is to say, there's no dramatic sense to what happens, just polite chit-chat interrupted by snarky comment or revealing admission or pointed rejoinder. Clearly, it seems possible Katharine is going to become more of a presence in their lives than anyone imagined, but who's to say? More importantly, who cares?

McNally's work here is far from his best, but he's incapable of writing a show without some witty lines and telling insight. Plus, he's blessed with excellent leads. In a lesser actress, Katharine might have just been a snippy bore. But Daly invests her with humor and self-awareness along with the anger and grief. Sometimes, you appreciate the greats even more when they're making the most out of lesser material.

The first minutes are the strongest as she and Weller warily work out how to deal with each other. But the more revelations that pile up, the more often one or another lets loose with a tirade about some long-suppressed issue, the less interested we become.

Weller (who even has his hand in his pocket in the poster, an enjoyably distracting tic of his), must shoulder a lot of essayistic passages pretending to be dialogue and does so with disarming success. Stegert has by far the least interesting role, but he's content to let Will be what he is and not soften this character's annoying quirks, even if his natural charm and talent makes us like Will anyway. They elevate the play tremendously.

It is enraging that people are forgetting the horrific waste of AIDS, the terror of those times. It's sad to see such a dramatic loss of a generation (akin to the youth wiped out by World War I) and how that loss is reduced from a chapter in history books to a paragraph and then a line and soon a footnote, as McNally puts it. The bewilderment of a woman of a certain age over how swiftly the world has changed around her (from the love that dare not speak its name to the love omnipresent in popular culture and embraced even by middle America) is also ripe territory. A gay man suddenly finding himself with a family is surely a premise as ripe for humor and drama as any story about any person unexpectedly burdened and lifted up by the responsibility of children.

But none of that is dealt with strongly in this slight work that offers up a small bit of righteous anger, a little humor and three pros doing their best under the circumstances.

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