

# Theater: 'Can-Can' Can; Familiar 'Country'; Sweet 'Cinderella'

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**CAN-CAN** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**THE COUNTRY HOUSE** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**CINDERELLA** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

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**PAPERMILL PLAYHOUSE**

Emmy winner David Lee -- who was a writer-producer on Cheers and went on to co-create Frasier and Wings -- has been making a specialty of reviving and reworking musicals with troubled books. For years, Lee has been focused on two shows in particular, staging them around the country and generally whipping them into shape. One is [Camelot](#), one of the best scores in musical theater with reportedly one of the worst books. [His latest mounting of that show is at Two River Theater](#) in Red Bank, New Jersey starting in mid-November.

And now here he comes with Can-Can, a show most everyone felt had a weak Cole Porter score and a cliched book by the legendary Abe Burrows. Lee has mounted this show over the past few years, including the Pasadena Playhouse in 2007 with much of the same creative team on board. The sole Broadway revival back in 1981 lasted a scant five performances (but still somehow garnered three Tony nominations).

Ever since then, everyone putting on Can-Can (and that hasn't happened often) shoehorns in other Porter songs to try and pump up the score. Against all logic, Lee has stuck with the original songs, adding only "Who Said Gay Paree?," a tune written for the show but cut out of town. While he and his writing partner Joel Fields politely insist they're only burnishing and polishing the work of Burrows (the show credits him with the book and them with a "Revised By" tag), in fact they've done considerable work here. The result is -- I imagine -- the strongest Can-Can yet and likely the best one can build with the material at hand. It's fun and light, but merely a minor show given a loving rebirth. No one would confuse it with a classic.

Kate Baldwin is the welcome center of this work that hopes to head to Broadway and has a Broadway calibre cast to back that up. She plays Pistache, the owner of a saucy French nightclub back in 1893. It pushes the boundaries of decency with the saucy Can-Can dance and has a full house to show for it. A new judge in town (Jason Daniele) is aghast to see the law being flouted like this and heads to the club to witness the scandalous behavior himself. (Originally, I think, the dance was scandalous for displaying the undies of the women in the chorus; now they've upped the ante by having the ladies remove their bloomers at the climax of Act One though of course the lights go dark before we can be scandalized ourselves.)

Turns out the judge is an old flame of Pistache and delighted to see her again. This canny switch is the show's most notable improvement on the original book. Instead of having these two people meet, instantly fall in love and then break up again just so they can be reunited at the end, Fields & Lee have given them a history, a much more satisfying spin on things. It's clear they still love each other. So when the most famous critic in Paris arrives and demands to see the Can-Can Supreme, Pistache boldly obliges, only to be shocked when the judge shuts her club down and tosses everyone in jail. Mon Dieu!

Will true love prevail? Will the sleazy critic never stop, seeming to sleep with Pistache and the seamstress

turned star Claudine (Megan Sikora), who only sees the man because it could make the fortune of her sculptor boyfriend Boris (Greg Hildreth)? Will they reprise the riotous Can-Can at the finale? Have you never seen a musical comedy?

First, the good news. This is a handsome production that is indeed pretty much Broadway ready on the technical side. While scenic designer Rob Bissinger clearly didn't have an open checkbook at his disposal, he's delivered a pop-up Paris that sets the mood, alongside lighting by Michael Gilliam. The costumes are fun and flashy throughout with two notable exceptions late in the show. It's only when Claudine is displayed in what are supposed to be high fashion and Pistache follows in another elaborate ensemble that Ann Hould-Ward stumbles into kitsch. They're the two least flattering costumes of the evening and are the very ones intended to be the best. Replace those with something more refined and less busy if not downright cacophonous and she'll be in good shape too.

And the cast is up to the task of the improved book. Tony nominee Kate Baldwin is a sweet-voiced star and brings much needed emotional gravitas to the proceedings. You can easily see why any man would want her so the stakes are high. She's not the first that springs to mind for playing a hard-bitten cynical nightclub owner (Baldwin's interactions with the audience feel too calculated at first) but she wins you over. Danieleley as her love interest is a journeyman performer (that's meant very much as a compliment) who gets the role of a lifetime and makes the most of it, albeit with a few notable stumbles in dialogue on opening night. And Berresse has fun as the hiss-able critic. (Who doesn't hate critics?) Their sword fight at the finale is actually a good combination of humor, character and some convincing sword play.

As the lovers intended to mirror the travails of our heroes, Sikora and Hildreth are strong. She does very well in the difficult task of dancing the Can-Can as if it's her first time, letting fear and joy and confusion flit across her face convincingly. Hildreth (who was on Broadway most recently with Cinderella as a revolutionary peasant) brings similar brio to his part as the hapless artist. Michael Kostroff has little to do other than be Pistache's gay best friend (it's a pity he doesn't even get to walk off into the sunset with a chorus boy or given some other business in the background to flesh out his part). But he does it with style. And Mark Price was hilarious in a throw-away bit as a poet who recites one of his pieces for the critic.

The choreography by Patti Colombo is unquestionably a highlight throughout, building to a show-stopping turn in the first act that justifiably had the audience roaring. Two caveats: it would be more effective for the Can-Can if one felt more sexual heat for the ladies rising from the men (all of whom danced very well). Everyone -- gay and straight -- should find the women desirable and there's precious little in the choreography to bring that out. Maybe the pats on their rumps should be less playful and more 50 Shades, to begin with?

Further, Molly Tynes and Michael McArthur did a great job in their featured duets in both acts. While Lulu had her revenge at the end of the battling number "Apache," I did wish his slapping her around didn't feel so one-sided throughout most of the piece. One could enjoy their fight more if she didn't seem to be bearing the brunt.

So the book is indeed a big improvement. Still, Cole Porter's score is far from his best. Even the standards that arose from it don't feel terribly specific to this show and these characters. "I Love Paris" is a great song, but it doesn't spring emotionally out of what's going on, does it? Baldwin sings it beautifully and it deserves its iconic status. But really, does it make any sense? The singer is trying to "explain" why they love Paris no matter the season. But who doesn't love Paris, whether or not it's raining or their love is near? It would make a lot more sense if the song was titled "I Love Boise" or "I Love Detroit." (In winter, even Romeo & Juliet would be grumpy in the Motor City.)

Nonetheless, it's a lovely melody and superior to the more modest "Allez Vous-En" and "C'est Magnifique." But thanks to the strong cast and Lee's sharp direction, minor numbers come across better. "Never, Never Be An Artist" (despite a tepid chorus) is good fun and Baldwin makes you see the comic "Every Man As A Stupid Man"

might be an overlooked gem.

The closest the show comes to a song that really reveals the heart of a character is "It's All Right With Me." The judge believes he is talking to a street walker and solicits her services, only to sing this song explaining why she'll never measure up to the woman he loves. The secret is that he's actually pouring out his heart to Pistache in disguise. It's a great song but they might fiddle with the way it's presented. I believe the judge solicits the hooker, pours out his heart and then repeats his offer before passing out, unable to consummate the transaction. It's useful in humanizing the law-and-order judge who refused to bend the rules even for his true love. But it would perhaps be more romantic if he made the offer, then poured out his song and apologized, telling her to take the money but he couldn't sleep with her anyway because his heart belonged to another. And then passed out. A small matter, but more satisfying.

I also question the staging decision of leaving the orchestra pit open even though they smartly put the orchestra in a balcony at the back of the stage as part of the nightclub, leaving most of the floor open for dancing. That offered a modest walkway the performers could use to create an added sense of intimacy when they used it. But it was hardly worth the distraction of that open hole that seemed more of an unnecessary obstacle for the dancers than anything else. (Only once did Colombo make use of it in an imaginative way.)

By and large clever touches abounded, like soliciting rhymes from the audience for the reprise of the Can-Can dance at the finale. Overall, it's a labor of love for Lee that has turned a modest musical into one that actually deserves to be seen again. You won't confuse it with Anything Goes, but audiences do love a chorus line and high-stepping numbers and -- let's face it -- the occasional glimpse of bloomers. And by god this show gives it to them.

**THE COUNTRY HOUSE** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE**

Sometimes, it can be helpful to hear about reviews before seeing a show. Naturally, you always want to see a masterpiece. But sometimes when the advance buzz isn't great it allows you to be pleasantly surprised by a solid, well-mounted show.

That's certainly the case with the new drama *The Country House*. Sure, it's Chekovian on the surface. But this Donald Margulies work is essentially a well-made play, not a desperate attempt to evoke the autumnal misery of Chekhov. It's quite funny (though not remotely a romp like *Vanya and Sonia...*) and serious too. The fine cast offers it up with care and insight.

The star is Blythe Danner as Anna, an actress of a certain age. Her children are reuniting on the sad anniversary of her daughter's death from cancer. Also along is step-son and world famous movie director Walter (David Rasche). Awkwardly, he's brought along his new girlfriend and future wife, Nell (Kate Jennings Grant). His daughter Susie (a very good Sarah Steele) is aghast. Perhaps a weekend to mourn his dead wife is not the best time to introduce her replacement? Not to be outdone, Susie's very theatrical grandmother Anna has invited TV star Michael (Daniel Sunjata) to crash on their couch during what was supposed to be an intimate weekend of remembrance.

Turns out Susie always had a crush on Michael and she's far from alone: Anna would like to act on the crush Michael had on her way back when while Nell proves to be the only woman Michael is actually interested in. Just to complicate things, Anna's son Eliot is a lost soul who felt his mom always loved sis more. And he had an intimate relationship with Nell way back when he used to get minor roles and they worked together on the road.

Passes will be made, recriminations surface and perhaps some peace achieved by the time everyone leaves to get on with their lives.

The story is awfully familiar and hardly deviates from what one would expect given the set-up. But Margulies is

blessed with a superior cast ably directed by Daniel Sullivan. I'm not sure I can call what John Lee Beatty did a set, since he seems to have simply built a country home onstage. It's that solid and convincing, with enough entrances and exits to allow all sorts of complications without calling attention to themselves. Ditto the other tech elements.

With apologies to Margulies, the stars here are the attraction. Danner had a few rough patches with the script, but since she was playing a star worried about remembering her lines, it was easily worked into her performance. Sunjata easily fits the bill as a George Clooney-like TV star that everyone wants. But he proved again why Sunjata has always been an exceptional actor. Lesser hands might have played his discussion of charity work for laughs but Sunjata manages to complicate how we feel about this man.

Ditto the rest from top to bottom, with special notice to Steele for making the voice of reason so appealing when it can often seem a scold. This ensemble reached a gentle, moving finale that transcended the familiar plot and made it specific and true. Sure, you've seen it before, but a generally solid play given a loving presentation by talented actors should never be taken for granted.

### **CINDERELLA \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*** **BROADWAY THEATRE**

I jumped at the chance to revisit Cinderella, which has employed celebrity casting to good effect as it eyes a closing date of January for this Rodgers & Hammerstein musical. It has a classic score and a modernized script by Douglas Carter Beane and I wondered how it would play on a new viewing.

Happily, the show is in good shape. Beane's update -- including a peasant revolutionary who wants the Prince to help the people, a nebbishy Prince who wants to do good and a more in-charge heroine -- feels much more organic the second time around. The dancing and choreography remain strong, moving the story forward seamlessly. And the old-fashioned effects to bring about turning rags into a gorgeous gown and so on remain pleasingly retro. The show will have run on Broadway for two years, including previews, and has surely made this perennial bursting with great songs a more popular choice for regional and community theater productions than in many a moon. All in all, a success.

The big names this time around are the rising star Keke Palmer as Cinderella and Sherri Shepherd once of The View as the evil stepmother. Both do well. Palmer burst into prominence with the movie Akeelah and the Bee in 2004 and has proven a real talent. You never know about child performers. Making the transition to adult roles is exceptionally difficult but Palmer looks set to do it. Her voice was lovely and Palmer handled the modest acting challenges with aplomb. She's no stage vet, but she could become one if she chose.

Like Palmer, Shepherd is making her Broadway debut. (For both of them, it's essentially their theatrical debut as far as I can tell.) Despite a wardrobe malfunction upon her entrance that Shepherd capably handled, she found a pretty good comic rhythm with her part. Shepherd was especially amusing when sharing a sweet moment with her daughters, though at the same time wondering why she was allowing herself to be kind to Cinderella.

The rest of the cast, both newcomers and veterans were solid. Judy Kaye soared -- literally -- as the Fairy Godmother. I must admit I was hoping whoever stepped into the part would insist those silly antennae be dropped from the Fairy Godmother's costume, but no such luck. Her outfits are generally of the over-the-top Halloween parade sort, whereas Cinderella looks genuinely lovely. And the score has so many strong numbers, you wonder why exactly it took so long to come to Broadway.

The notable exception to a pleasant evening was Joe Carroll as Prince Topher. One of the big changes in this production was to conceive of the Prince as a regular joe, not a square-jawed dashing handsome sort. The very appealing and talented Santino Fontana originated the part. He had a decent singing voice but was no belter by any stretch. However, he had charm to spare and won you over. In recasting this part, the producers

were wide open. The Prince didn't need to be handsome (though he could be; just make him clumsy). His dancing is minimal, the sort most any actor should be able to manage. Really all he had to do was be affable and sing.

Carroll is indeed appealing in his acting and may be wildly talented. But his singing was not remotely up to snuff. He couldn't sing on key with consistency and certainly couldn't project. Even sitting close to the stage, one worried for him each time he had to sing. Fearing for the actor is not exactly the mood you want in a romance. It happens surprisingly often on Broadway: musicals with actors in key roles who really can't sing or certainly can't sing in the style called for. With all the out of work actors in the world, one wonders how casting directors Cindy Tolan and Adam Caldwell chose to make Carroll's dreams come true with his debut in a leading role on Broadway. It does him and the show no favors.

## THEATER OF 2014

[Beautiful: The Carole King Musical](#) \*\*\*

[Rodney King](#) \*\*\*

[Hard Times](#) \*\* 1/2

[Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead](#) \*\*

[I Could Say More](#) \*

[The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner](#) \*\*

[Machinal](#) \*\*\*

[Outside Mullingar](#) \*\*\*

[A Man's A Man](#) \* 1/2

[The Tribute Artist](#) \*\* 1/2

[Transport](#) \*\*

[Prince Igor at the Met](#) \*\*

[The Bridges Of Madison County](#) \*\* 1/2

[Kung Fu \(at Signature\)](#) \*\*

[Stage Kiss](#) \*\*\*

[Satchmo At The Waldorf](#) \*\*\*

[Antony and Cleopatra at the Public](#) \*\*

[All The Way](#) \*\* 1/2

[The Open House \(Will Eno at Signature\)](#) \*\* 1/2

[Wozzeck \(at Met w Deborah Voigt and Thomas Hampson and Simon O'Neill\)](#)

[Hand To God](#) \*\*\*

[Tales From Red Vienna](#) \*\*

[Appropriate \(at Signature\)](#) \*

[Rocky](#) \* 1/2

[Aladdin](#) \*\*\*

[Mothers And Sons](#) \*\*

[Les Miserables](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[Breathing Time](#) \* 1/2

[Cirque Du Soleil's Amaluna](#) \* 1/2

[Heathers The Musical](#) \* 1/2

[Red Velvet, at St. Ann's Warehouse](#) \*\*\*

[Broadway By The Year 1940-1964](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[A Second Chance](#) \*\*

[Guys And Dolls](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[If/Then](#) \* 1/2