

Theater: City of Lights Musical Smackdown: 'Gigi' vs. 'An American in Paris'

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GIGI * ½ out of ****

NEIL SIMON THEATRE

AN AMERICAN IN PARIS ** ½ out of ****

PALACE THEATRE

Two musicals set in Paris opened on Broadway within four days of each other. Both are shows that began as musicals created for the movies, something almost unheard of today unless you're an animated princess. Both won the Best Picture Oscar. An American In Paris won in 1951, when the far superior drama A Place In The Sun should have triumphed. Gigi beat a very weak field in 1958. Vertigo or Touch Of Evil or A Night To Remember should have won, but they weren't even nominated. I suppose I'd pick the problematic adaptation of Cat On A Hot Tin Roof that was nominated as a worthier winner.

Curiously, both films - huge triumphs in their day - have fallen hard in critical standing over the years. An American In Paris is politely remembered for its dance, while the paper-thin storyline is passed over in silence. Both director Vincente Minnelli and star Gene Kelly did much better work.

Gigi has fared even worse. The follow-up to the smash Lerner & Lowe hit My Fair Lady (often dubbed the "perfect" musical, fairly enough), Gigi was a blockbuster. But time hasn't been kind to it. My Fair Lady led to a steep decline artistically, with Gigi and Camelot (which has a great score but a terrible book) and On A Clear Day You Can See Forever and the movie Paint Your Wagon all proving increasingly problematic, especially in their books. (Alan Jay Lerner also wrote the book for An American In Paris, whose music is by the Gershwins, of course.)

An American In Paris didn't have enough substance while Gigi in a way had too much. It's a romanticized tale about selling off the favors of a young virginal woman and its highlight is the now creepy sight of the aging Maurice Chevalier crooning "Thank Heaven For Little Girls."

American In Paris gets a dramatically beefed up story courtesy of Craig Lucas, changing its setting to just after World War II, adding in details of collaboration and post-war tension, not to mention turning the lone suitor of Gene Kelly into three different men vying for the affections of our heroine. More importantly, it has embraced the strength of the film: the dancing. Director Christopher Wheeldon - a huge talent in the ballet world - is making his Broadway debut and he's cast major ballet stars in the lead roles.

Gigi has gone in the opposite direction, downplaying as much as possible what the story is actually about, casting her lover as a man essentially the same age as our little girl and taking away "Thank Heaven For Little Girls" from the old rogue Honoré and giving it to Gigi's grandmother and aunt.

From afar, An American In Paris has succeeded better. Neither show got raves; neither show is a smash hit. But An American In Paris has done substantially better at the box office, while Gigi has struggled. Yet in a way, An American In Paris is more disappointing because it actually had the chance to be very good.

First, Gigi. Gaston (Corey Cott) is a handsome, charming heir to a fortune in sugar. A Kardashian sort of celebrity, Gaston feels obliged to feed the gossip pages for some reason; he is always wooing some new beauty and showering her with jewels until he or she or both of them become bored and move on, preferably with some spectacular blowup that can be the talk of the town.

But what Gaston truly enjoys are the quiet, simple moments he spends with Mamita, the one-time love of his uncle Honoré and the grandmother to the spunky little Gigi (Vanessa Hudgens). Gigi doesn't like him for his money or wealth, not her. She teases him mercilessly, much prefers chocolates to furs and when they're together they laugh and laugh.

But what's this? Gaston goes away for a few days and returns to realize Gigi has become...a young woman. A very pretty young woman. He loves her; she loves him, but first they must do a tiresome little dance where Gaston offers all sorts of inducements to her protectors in order to ensure that Gigi will be financially set once Gaston has moved on. True love never comes into it, except for the two young folk and not until the last moment.

Among the many missed opportunities in what should have been a rethought Gigi, our heroine might have been surprised by the negotiations taking place. She should be angry with her grandmother and aunt for putting a price on her love; she should be angry with Gaston for thinking she could be bought and need to be wooed all over again. Instead, they spend a miserable couple of scenes together going through the motions of man and mistress. When you think they'd both rather just quit, suddenly they're getting married.

By and large, the older folk have it better in this Gigi. Howard McGillin has the right glib air for Honoré and is easily matched by Victoria Clark as Mamita. They have fun with "I Remember It Well" and the show's purest musical highlight is Clark's lovely delivery of "Say A Prayer" as the eleven o'clock number. Dee Hoty is also fun as Aunt Alicia.

Hudgens makes a respectable debut as Gigi. She has a lovely clear voice and sings with pleasurable attention to the lyrics, as opposed to vocal flourishes. At first, her plucky nature (typified by Gigi stretching her arms out behind her in exuberant delight) works fine. Unfortunately, it's the only note director Eric Schaeffer elicits from her and the longer the show goes on, the more repetitive it becomes. Nonetheless, she is comfortable onstage and handles the choreography of Joshua Bergasse with skill. With work, Hudgens might have a bright future on the stage.

Steffanie Leigh is good as a rival of sorts (she plays Gaston's lover at the start of the show) and scores with her comic number "A Toujours." The show might have had fun with the disparity between this tall blonde beauty and the pint-sized Hudgens but no such luck, just one more example of a lost opportunity.

The songs are far from top drawer, for I've already mentioned the two best. Would be show-stoppers like "The Night They Invented Champagne" fall flat. The comic relief of battling lawyers in "The Contract" is painful to watch. And every tune seems to drag itself out, playing out at a slower and slower pace till you're left waiting for them to end.

The scenic design by Derek McLane begins handsomely, with a sweeping metal staircase and arches filling up the set at the start. But it never seems to go away and is just a smidge too busy. Like everything else, it wears out its welcome. The costumes by Catherine Zuber seem to get less attractive as well, especially the poorly thought out black and white number for Gigi's coming out scene. She's not a willowy creature and this might have been entirely rethought rather than echoing Leslie Caron and Audrey Hepburn (earlier Gigis in both the musical and play versions).

With forced humor and scenes of gloomy unhappiness rather than blooming romance, the second act proves a struggle. Happily, the show has one saving grace: Corey Cott as the young Gaston. He replaced Jeremy Jordan

in Newsies and it's immediately clear why when you see him. Mind you, casting Cott throws off yet one more element of the story. (In age, Gaston should be like a much, much older brother or uncle, not a fellow playmate.) The fact that he's not an older gentleman but rather a contemporary makes it all the more confusing that their romance can't just blossom.

But Cott has a winning charm and a lovely voice and stage presence to spare. The story becomes nonsense and the song isn't good enough, but the title tune where Gaston begins in anger only to realize he's deeply in love almost works here thanks to him. It's hardly enough to rescue a show that has a weak score and a weaker book and was a poor choice for reviving in the first place. But like any sophisticated Parisian, one seeks out pleasure wherever one can.

Looking for the good moments in Gigi is like panning for gold: they appear far too infrequently. It's quite a different story in the musical An American In Paris. This show starts off strongly and moves briskly through its confident first act. Then just as you're getting excited, it falls completely apart on every level in the second act.

Not even a big dance number - which should be the show's crowning achievement - can rescue it. Still, it's good enough to hope choreographer and director Christopher Wheeldon will return to Broadway soon. Flawed as it is, An American In Paris easily has the best dancers, the best use of choreography to move the story along and even the most fluid and graceful set changers on Broadway.

The story is now set in 1945, right at the end of the war. Our hero Jerry (Robert Fairchild) is a brash young American soldier who wants to be an artist. He is painting and sketching everything in sight. Jerry spots a beautiful young woman (Leanne Cope) but loses her in a crowd. The city is a little grey and cloudy (even though it's Paris) because the war still haunts everyone, naturally. A collaborator is denounced and pounced upon by an angry crowd.

Nonetheless, our hero loves the place and when he finally gets a ticket to head home, he tears it up and stays. Before you can blink, he's in a small café answering the rat-a-tat questions of a fellow American and fellow artist, a would-be composer and war veteran named Adam (Brandon Uranowitz). Adam's working on a classical piece and also decided to try his luck in Paris. He's creating a night club act for the wealthy but dissatisfied Henri (Max von Essen) whose very respectable parents demand propriety at all times. Henri perhaps is not so terribly interested in the fairer sex, though the idea occurs to his mother (a very amusing Veanne Cox) and friends more than it occurs to him. Nonetheless, he should get married and soon...preferably to the adorable young Jewess Henri's family sheltered during the war.

That Jewess is Lise (Leanne Cope), the very same beauty Jerry fell hard for his first day in town. And what do you know? Adam plays the piano at ballet auditions and falls for Lise as well. All three friends keep their romance a secret from one another: Adam is composing a ballet for her, Jerry sketches her during the afternoon and Henri tries to gin up some enthusiasm for marrying her, all while preparing his scandalously common nightclub act of song and dance.

So there you have it. The drama-free plot of the movie has become a love quadrangle with three men vying for the heart of Lise. Book writer Craig Lucas also throws in some murky issues about the Resistance that are poorly explained, not to mention a wealthy American patroness of the arts named Milo (Jill Paice). She eyes appreciably the backside of Jerry during their first encounter, keeps him around as arm candy for her many evenings out and then -- darn it -- falls hard for the guy herself.

All this works well in the first act, where the dance is more integrated into the story. Jerry's first day in Paris, meeting Lise, the angry mob tearing into a collaborator, his burgeoning friendship with Adam and Henri all are told essentially through fluid, lovely dance pieces. The scenes flow together nicely, aided by a smart visual conception for the show. The set and costume design is by Bob Crowley with projection design by 59 Productions. In combination with the lighting of Natasha Katz, they've created a visual sketch of Paris. Sets are

often suggested by drawings that fill in on the back wall or a series of movable antique mirrors that are arranged here and there on the stage. It all works very well, creating a large open space where the excellent dance ensemble Wheeldon has created can move unimpeded by bulky sets.

The peak of this conception is the meeting place where Jerry and Lise meet in the afternoons. It's sketched in with just a low wall and a bench as props, including two small boats that hang down from the ceiling but seem to be floating in the canal behind them. It's simple, lovely and quite graceful. When they return to the scene again a little later, it's now developed a little further through the eye of Jerry who paints what he saw in a more modern, suggestive style.

Fairchild has a direct, vaguely arrogant American manner about his character, much like Gene Kelly in the movie. It works well at first, though it becomes a little boorish as the show goes on (which isn't always Fairchild's fault). However, all is forgiven when he dances.

Jerry makes his friends to the tune of "I've Got Rhythm." He sings "I've Got Beginner's Luck" and then dances with humor while wooing Lise in a department store (one of the show's best numbers, all of which take place in this first act). Cope solos capably on "The Man I Love," her one big number. And "S Wonderful" and "Shall We Dance?" and more all move with grace and charm.

So what happens? The story they've begun in Act One is bungled and then just gets in the way during Act Two. The three way competition for Lise's heart proves a bust. Henri is never that interested to begin with, it seems. Worse, the intellectual Adam who might plausibly compete by creating great music for Lise turns into a schlub whenever he's around her. With Jerry arrogant and apparently shacking up with a wealthy woman, Adam could have had a shot. But Lise sees him as nothing more than a friend, instead of the musical genius who might celebrate Lise as his muse and make them both world famous. In fact, they barely speak so one can't even enjoy their artistic collaboration.

And a subplot about Henri's family is unnecessarily confusing. All Lucas wants to suggest is that while they bravely served in the Resistance, it's too soon for the family to reveal what they did or claim credit for saving Lise's life. Quite simply, too many people still in power were collaborators and might enact revenge. Also, it's unclear what might happen post-war and whether the right sort will regain power, which is why the Resistance continued even after the war ended. But the show is unnecessarily tight-lipped about this, making one wonder exactly what Henri's parents did that might seem shameful. (When Milo toasts their bravery, it makes matters even more confusing.)

All of this pales in comparison to the real problem: the musical numbers collapse in sense. Act Two begins with Jerry getting bored during a hokey ballet piece that gives him "Fidgety Feet." This makes him look a little obnoxious and feels unmotivated by anything to do with the actual story at hand. Thus, this Act Two opener plays more like filler than an exciting resumption of the romance we're supposed to care about.

That's followed by two duets that clash horribly. In the first, Milo and Henri sing "Who Cares?" upon discovering Jerry and Lise are deeply in love. Unfortunately, because of the arrangement or the orchestration or the staging or the incompatibility of their voices or whatever, they don't even begin to get in sync. It sounds like two people singing two different songs in two different scenes accidentally overlapping. The exact same problem bedevils "But Not For Me," a duet that features Adam and Milo.

Then Henri has his big nightclub debut and in another misjudgment, most of it takes place inside Henri's mind. In real life, he starts off stumbling around and barely getting the lyrics out to "I'll Build A Stairway To Paradise." Yet in his head it becomes a lavish, Vegas sort of number, the sort Peter Allen would perfect in decades to come. Then the fantasy ends and Henri recovers despite the shock of seeing his parents in the audience and he reaches the end of the song acquitting himself decently.

However, we want to know if Henri really has talent, so letting his big moment take place in his mind confuses our burning question: is he any good? Also, "I'll Build A Stairway To Paradise" just isn't a very good song so it's not terribly interesting as a song or as a minimal dance piece. So it ends and we're still not sure if he's actually any good. Then his dad embraces Henri as if the man were the next Maurice Chevalier and no one could ever doubt it.

The last big number is the big ballet, the piece we've been waiting for. It too is a disappointment. The film's big number for Leslie Caron is the one unqualified success of the film. Here we have a period-influenced piece (my guest hated the Mondrian-inspired costumes and the retro air). It takes flight briefly when Jerry and Lise don black and dance together during her fantasy scene interjected in the midst of Lise's big moment. It can't compete with the film's highlight, which is a pity since the film could be outpaced easily in so many other ways.

Fairchild is an appealing lead, even if this first stab at holding center stage in a Broadway musical isn't a complete triumph as actor and singer. Both he and Cope of course dance beautifully; Fairchild in particular looks like he could explore more such roles and grow into a complete actor. The supporting actors are good, with Veanne Cox especially funny in the droll turn of Henri's mother (she looks a dead ringer for a sister of Tilda Swinton throughout).

Uranowitz is the narrator and would-be competitor, though the show doesn't let him out of the starting gate in terms of romance. Essen has a harder part, since the show's biggest bungle is the suggestion that Henri is gay. We don't expect him to form a local chapter of the Mattachine Society (which of course didn't exist until 1950). But Henri's mother bluntly asks him if he doesn't really care for gays. And when Henri mentions a secret, his two best friends immediately say "Which one?" So why the timidity over what he really wants?

The show can't even give Henri the dignity of realizing he's gay or god forbid singling out one of the many handsome dancers on hand for a future dalliance. Instead, he remains opaque and not in an interesting way. The closest the show gets to suggesting the truth is the rather embarrassing moment when Henri compliments the woman Milo on her shoes and she asks him to join her on a shopping expedition. If you're not going to deal with it in an emotionally satisfying or even sexy way, why bring it up in the first place?

So with Gigi, we have a bad movie that isn't improved by fleeing from the story it's telling. In An American In Paris, we have a new talent on Broadway in the form of Wheeldon who delivers a solid first act and shows a real flair (naturally) for telling story through dance. It's somewhat an improvement on the film, if far from a musical worth reviving in years to come without a lot more work on the book and that second act.

It's always charming to visit the city of lights in real life. That charm is mostly lacking in Gigi (despite a game cast) and only somewhat present in An American In Paris. A truly great musical creates its own magic but these two at best can only borrow a little.

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