

# Theater: Heathers The Musical? What's Their Damage?

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**HEATHERS THE MUSICAL** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**RED VELVET** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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**NEW WORLD STAGES**

If you sort of winced at the title Heathers The Musical, detecting a distinct lack of imagination -- well, you're right. The black comedy was one of [my favorite films of 1989](#) and a brief scan of the films above Heathers shows a lot of other properties that will probably get musicalized some day soon, if they haven't already: The War Of The Roses, Field Of Dreams, Say Anything, Dead Poets Society, Scandal (whoops, Andrew Lloyd Webber just bombed in London tackling that same story) and in the spirit of Heathers we might get Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure. Whoah, dude!

It's not just that Heathers feels like a property rather than a passion. The more you think about it, the trickier such a project proves. Heathers was an outrageous satire with two career-defining roles for Winona Ryder and Christian Slater, who both immediately became much much cooler thanks to this film. More tricky, the film includes a homicidal student offing classmates for bullying and then threatening to blow the entire school sky high with explosives. This was silly, even though Slater made it sexily appealing. When our heroine joked her teen angst had a body count, it was funny, not intended as a harbinger of things to come. It's the cool loner who is supposed to rescue us from conformity. But in the case of Heathers, the cool loner proves a lunatic even scarier than a head cheerleader.

So Heathers The Musical must give juicy roles to two leads who can step out of the shadows of those memorable performances, navigate material about school shootings now far too believable and write a clutch of catchy songs. It doesn't succeed.

The scenic design of Timothy R. Mackabee is nonexistent but the costumes of Amy Clark pay suitable homage to the movie and get the show off to a colorful start with "Beautiful," a generic but somewhat catchy number that introduces the main characters and sets up the treacherous waters of high school where cliques are everything. The book, music and lyrics are by the team of Kevin Murphy (Reefer Madness) and Laurence O'Keefe (Legally Blonde, the beloved Bat Boy).

We meet Veronica (Barrett Wilbert Weed), the smart girl who decides to get in with the "Heathers" so she can survive school, never imagining they'll take her under their wings. Looking on with disapproval is the cool loner J.D. (Ryan McCartan), who dons a trench coat in an appropriate but still uncomfortable reminder of Columbine. To go along with her new friends (led ably by the standout Heather of Jessica Keenan Wynn), Veronica allows them to taunt her former best friend Martha (Katie Ladner). Still, J.D. quotes poetry and is super cool and Veronica beds him, only to find that when they accidentally kill one Heather, he thinks that's an excellent idea and begins to off anyone that annoys him. As in the film, it climaxes with J.D. threatening to blow up the entire school with a bomb and Veronica desperately trying to stop him

Problems abound, starting with the songs. "Freeze Your Brain," an ode to 7-Eleven and Slurpees (the home

away from home for the itinerant J.D.) is alright and a few others are ok. But songs about being horny, about partying the night away and a tune of defiance ("Dead Girl Walking") all blend together. The closest they get to a proper tune revealing character and pushing the story forward is the act two number "Seventeen" in which Heather rather plaintively wishes she could just be 17 for a while, a piece that might work in years to come for anyone who can identify with growing up too fast.

But vocally, the cast isn't up to the raucous demands of the melodies. When asked to sing in a regular singing voice, Weed, McMartan and the rest do fine. But often the numbers push things to a rock and roll decibel and the result is truly akin more to screeching as these theater babies try to find their inner Janis Joplin, especially Weed on "Dead Girl Walking" and Michelle Duffy as the hippie teacher/counselor Ms. Fleming on "Shine A Light." Either hire different singers or adjust the songs to suit their voices.

Crucially, the musical fails to understand the black humor that runs throughout the film and undercut their own tale time and again. Notably, some of the best dialogue from the film is peppered throughout the play, but they whiz by and barely register, except for the classic line about chainsaws that here is delivered in telegraphed, get-ready-to-applaud style.

More fundamentally, they missed the joke: in Heathers, when the lead Heather dies and it's seen as a suicide, offing yourself suddenly seems like the coolest thing in town. So when Martha tries to kill herself and fails, she's mocked for trying to be cool but failing even at suicide. (The play ignores that mostly.) Another Heather confesses her fears anonymously on the radio, but here that's turned into her becoming a TV news whore, offering up her story to anyone with a camera. In the movie, when her confession of fear is "outed," she too is mocked because killing yourself is cool but whimpering about your insecurity is not. In the movie, that Heather then really does try to kill herself but Veronica stops her. It's brutal, funny and real because nothing has actually changed except what constitutes "cool."

The irony piles up with the murder of two bullying jocks that J.D. frames as a gay suicide pact. It prompts one of the funniest lines in the movie: the loutish dad of one of the boys (a father who has been shown to be as much of a knuckle-dragger as his kid) is moved to hysteria, throws himself on the coffin and shouts out, "I love my dead gay son." This is completely ruined in the musical because in a lame attempt to up the ante, the two dads admit at the funeral that they've fooled around before and start making out. Of course, if they're gay, then it's not really funny anymore that they've become sensitized to gay issues; it's just sad that it took the death/suicide of their sons to get them to admit it. And if they're gay, maybe their brutish, date-rapey kids really were gay too and just over-compensating. All the nasty black humor is leached out of it. See how the problems compound when you randomly switch things around?

Finally, Veronica is softened up way too much. In the film, she's more deeply implicated in the murder of the jocks, albeit unwittingly, which makes it easier to understand why she doesn't turn in J.D. or back off sooner. Her final showdown with J.D. is more hilariously bad-ass cinematically, with the blast that kills him lighting Veronica's cigarette, signaling her complete transformation. In the musical, it's far more anguished and wimpy, with lessons to be learned and hugs to be shared.

Other than the costumes, little can be highlighted, including the anonymous direction of Andy Fickman and choreography of Marguerite Derricks. They try to give Ladner a solo highlight with "Kindergarten Boyfriend," but she can only do so much with a modest number. The rest, from "Prom Or Hell?" to "My Dead Gay Son" and "Shine A Light," simply leave no impression. You can't adapt a black comedy by trying to lighten it up; that just turns everything grey. So Heathers The Musical is not very, not very at all.

**RED VELVET** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE**

Red Velvet is an intriguing experience. The inspiration for playwright Lolita Chokrabarti is the life of actor Ira

Aldridge, an African American artist who enjoyed major acclaim in Europe as a Shakespearean actor in the 1800s. Like many blacks in the 20th century who found refuge from racism on the Continent, Aldridge left America to work first as a dresser in the UK, then worked his way onto the stage in small demonstrations and ultimately major roles including Othello (of course) and Shylock and the title role in Richard III.

It's a rich life story and Chokrabarti was clearly overwhelmed with the possibilities: racism in the theater and the world in the 19th century, changing styles in acting, an aging artist at the end of his days, the passing of the torch from one bright light (Edmund Kean) to another, friendship among outcasts and more all offer strands for this drama. And there's the rub. Chokrabarti has assembled ideas for several different plays and strung them together. It's an unsatisfying work, but is presented with such skill and precision by director Indhu Rubasingham and the entire cast (especially Adrian Lester as Aldridge) that the evening itself is satisfying nonetheless.

Here's a trailer from the UK run:

It begins with the actors on stage, all facing makeup mirrors on either side, preparing for the show. At times throughout the night, they sit quietly or watch the proceedings of each other onstage with varying degrees of intensity and reaction. This isn't a full-proof device but it's often effective and here it's done with nuance and precision.

Then comes a framing device that would be unnecessary if Lester weren't so commanding as the elderly Aldridge. A female Polish journalist (Rachel Finnegan, good in multiple roles) is trying to break down barriers herself by snagging an interview with the legendary actor. (Aldridge was especially popular in Russia and Eastern Europe.) The lion in winter growls and snaps but doesn't bite and soon agrees to answer a few of her questions, invariably with a dismissive comment about how foolish those questions are or complaints about the journalist not having her facts right. Lester is magnetic here, sagging in weariness but immediately conveying the demanding majesty of a star of the theater. But even he can't keep us from seeing this device as merely decorative, especially when it wastes time at the end of the show by delving into the journalist's travails. (We don't care any more than Aldridge does).

Happily, this is finally ended and we get to the heart of the matter by jumping back decades in time. The great Edmund Kean is ill and his theater company is at loose ends for that evening's performance of Othello. It's just the opportunity the French manager Pierre (Eugene O'Hare) has been waiting for. Despite Kean's son Charles (Oliver Ryan) expecting to take over the lead role and everyone else to "move up," (that is, take the next role up in importance), Pierre says everyone will remain as they are and the unknown Ira Aldridge will play the Moor. That's a ticklish proposition even before most of them find out Aldridge is black and will be wooing and killing the paramour of Charles, leading lady Ellen Tree (an excellent Charlotte Lucas).

It's not just Aldridge's skin that rankles some, for he also proposes a more modern style of acting. This is where Red Velvet truly delivers: the rehearsal scenes are funny and fascinating. Aldridge isn't Brando -- he's still assuming the awfully mannered poses of his fellow cast members. But he's also driven by an intellectual desire to appear more natural onstage. Aldridge politely but firmly suggests Tree actually look at him when he has arrived onstage as Othello and they're saying hello. It's a revolutionary idea to the others, in a way, but Tree takes to it like a duck to water and has suggestions of her own to offer, like mildly suggesting he change how to pronounce the word "content."

This creative banter is good but almost nothing compared to the remarkable effect when we get a glimpse of that evening's Othello performance in progress. Somehow, Lester and Lucas manage to embody the mannered acting style of an earlier era. Without anachronism or suddenly seeming "modern" a la Shakespeare In Love, they breathe life into their parts and show both how that earlier style could transfix audiences and how Aldridge and others were dragging it into a new immediacy. When he demands she produce the ill-fated handkerchief and she can't, Lester-as-Aldridge-as-Othello emits a passionate exhalation of breath that sounds like the rousing

anger of a dragon. It's positively magnetic. (The excellent sound is by Paul Arditti.)

If only the show had spent more time on this creative process, with the irony that critics would dismiss Aldridge out of hand for racist reasons serving as the denouement. One fellow cast member defends him against hateful slurs by deliciously saying he thought Aldridge's pronunciation was very good..."for an American." That right there is the rich vein Chokrabarti should have mined further.

Instead, this highlight is followed by a knock-down drag out fight between Aldridge and Pierre. It has little import because until they begin fighting, their relationship hasn't been made clear in the least. Was Aldridge his servant as some actors think? It's clearly implied that Pierre is gay and that Aldridge stood by him during some earlier crisis; fair enough but how much support could a black American actor who hasn't had his big break truly offer? It sounds like Pierre fought for Aldridge every step of the way, so is it wrong for the actor to feel so betrayed?

They then hint that Pierre might have underlying prejudices of his own, when perhaps it might have been better to present their parry and thrust in more ironic terms, rather than as revelation. In any case, when we haven't the slightest idea how important the relationship is between these two friends and what it's based on, it's hard to know what's at stake when they argue bitterly.

Unfortunately, this battle is the climax of the play, followed by a return to the aging Aldridge and the uninteresting plight of a Polish woman who wants to make it as a journalist.

With all these flaws in the dramatic structure, it's a testament to the excellent cast, the superior technical elements and Rubasingham's steady hand that Red Velvet is as enjoyable as it is. We'll never get to study the acting style of the 19 century the way we can observe early silent movies. But for a few brief, marvelous moments, Lester and Lucas and the others take us back in time.

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