

# Theater: 'It Shoulda Been You' Ties the Knot, Clumsily

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**IT SHOULD A BEEN YOU** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**BROOKS ATKINSON THEATRE**

Some people like to go to weddings so they can sit in the back and make catty remarks about the bride's dress, the tacky reception, the hung-over best man and place bets on how long it'll last. Not me. Some people imagine critics love to see shows that don't work so they can sit up front and make catty remarks about the self-defeating set design, the flat lyrics, the handsome best man and place bets on how long it'll last. Not me. Actually, it's a lot more fun to see a wedding of two people in love where no one really cares about the details of the reception and you believe they're gonna last. And it's a lot more fun to see a new show you love, share all the good things about it and place bets on how long it'll run and run.

You know where I'm going with this, right? *It Shoulda Been You* is a work of love by director David Hyde Pierce, who has marshaled an excellent cast making the most of pretty thin, obvious material by his husband, Brian Hargrove. That's a worthy and exciting bit of trivia: the first husband to direct his partner's new musical on Broadway. It's a musical comedy taking place during the day of a wedding with all the usual complications and some unusual ones. But despite some modern twists to the formula, it's as familiar and unimaginative as you might fear. Innocuous, to be sure. But what a sad compliment to give a new musical; one would rather send regrets and a fancy blender.

Hargrove's book is filled with stereotypes and old gags (the music and concept is by Barbara Anselmi). A nice Jewish girl is marrying a goyish (but awfully good-looking) boy. Can you imagine? The mothers-in-law don't get along. Really! The wedding planner is terribly efficient, almost psychic in the way he predicts and prepares for (almost) every contingency and is gayer than a three dollar bill. OMG! The full-figured older sister deals with fat jokes, pretends she is perfectly happy but despairs of her own happy ending. Will she find it? Do you have to ask?

If a father asks which way the bride's stern, dominating mother has gone, you can be sure he'll say thanks and head in the opposite direction. It's that type of show. The lyrics aren't much better: "Oh boy, am I verklempt/ It's better than I ever dreamt" is about the best on offer. It's sheet cake from a grocery store rather than a hand-crafted, three tier treat.

So here's the good news: the wedding party is filled with talent. The roles may be tired and obvious, but when you've got real pros delivering them, time can pass painlessly if not memorably. Tyne Daly is the mother of the bride, holding the stage with casual ease and keeping all the other wedding guests jumping. Going toe to toe with her is Harriet Harris as the mother of the groom. Yes, she's asked to play yet another drunk but of course she does it with aplomb. Edward Hibbert as the wedding planner? He'll put a little spin on your lame gag so the anticipation of the obvious joke distracts you from how obvious the joke actually proves to be.

And on and on. Sierra Boggess and David Burtka do what they can with anonymous bride and groom parts. Lisa Howard brings great dignity and a great voice to a cliched character. And Josh Grisetti has a lot of fun with the show's best number, the elaborate title song he kicks off from a seat in the audience. You've seen it all before

but moment to moment the cast doesn't make you mind so much. They can't paper over the anonymous nature of most of the songs, though Howard gives sparkle to her big moments on the opener and then "Jenny's Blues."

The problems don't end with the book and songs. The scenic design by Anna Louizos is one of the most oddly problematic I've seen in a long time. It's a classic set for what yearns to be a farce: we begin with a view of two floors at the hotel where the wedding will take place. On one level we see a hotel hallway, complete with four doors leading to hotel rooms. On the second level, also in another anonymous hallway, we see four more doors to four more rooms, with a stairway visible in the background. One can easily imagine lots of doors opening and closing, as farces tend to make happen.

That ground floor looks like a hallway and yet there's a desk in the middle of it towards the start of the show. Is there a desk in the hallway, maybe in a nook? No, we're actually in a room, not the hallway, even though every other visual element screams out "hallway." And so it continues for the rest of the show: every scene that's supposed to take place in a hotel room (or the salon or wherever) feels like it's taking place in a hallway. And every scene that's supposed to take place in a hallway somehow feels like it's inside a room.

We're always discombobulated, especially when in an imaginative low point two of the doors jut out and are supposed to represent bathroom stalls in a public restroom at the hotel, even though they look nothing like the sort. Occasionally, hotel employees wheel in and out some bland-looking little couch/seats to give the sense of a lobby or something and it feels terribly chintzy.

The plot complications don't help, confusing what little we think we know about the characters and not clearing up the things that don't make any sense. The big final scene features a lot of actors standing around, looking thoughtful or confused or loving while someone or other explains what's really been going on until we can get to the inevitable happy ending. One doubts there will be a happy ending for this show on Broadway, which is no more fun than going to a real wedding of a couple that's doomed to fail.

P.S. A panini station at a wedding is always tacky. Chocolate fountain? Bring it on. But a panini station is gauche.

### **SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT**

Seriously, this is a real spoiler alert, though I don't want to build it up. It's no fun knowing in advance a show has some major twist. But one can't really talk about *It Shoulda Been You* without talking about the twist. So if you're going, don't get your hopes up for a "wow" moment; just go and try to enjoy. Only read this if you have already seen it or never will.

In fact, the twist -- while well-intentioned -- is an utter mess. Three-fifths of the way through the show, we suddenly find out why the ex-boyfriend of the bride keeps saying she shouldn't get married. Turns out the bride AND the groom are both gay. They're only getting married so the groom can inherit money from his homophobic grandfather. Fine. Good! I can easily imagine crafting an amusing little show out of that material. (And for a screwball comedy built around a gay man and his straight female friend getting married so they can collect all the gifts, read [Joe Keenan's hilarious comic novel Blue Heaven](#).)

But *It Shoulda Been You* bungles almost every possibility this concept offers. First, the secret is held back until much of the show is over, when it would be more fun to be in on the action from the start. Then this silly show becomes all serious as the bride suddenly wrestles with her desire to come out. Hey, we're here for fun, not self-flagellation! It takes the wind out of the sails of whatever modest comic momentum they've created.

Even worse, this makes no sense. The mother of the groom has already had a song where she says she tried to raise her son to be gay. (She always wanted to be the most important woman in his life.) So you know she'll be thrilled at the news. (Harris gets a big laugh with her "Yes!") But why didn't the groom come out? Clearly, his mom at least wouldn't care, he's got a super cute boyfriend (Nick Spangler is the appealing best man/FWB) and

seems well-adjusted about the whole gay thing. He needs to fulfill his grandfather's will but he doesn't need to be closeted to do so.

We immediately watch as pretty much every parent in sight is immediately gay-positive and supportive, undercutting even further the intense scene where the bride plunges into honesty against the advice of the groom, the best man and her love, the maid of honor.

Plus, the show fumbles its chance to fix the biggest problem in this whole mess. From the first minute we see them together, we understand Marty (the ex-boyfriend of the bride and the one her parents wish was the groom) is meant to be with the older, curvier sister Jenny. They shared a first kiss, she's crazy about him, he seems crazy about her and we keep thinking, so why was he dating the other sister? Why hasn't he declared his love? Why hasn't she declared her love for him since he broke up with her sister years ago? (He's been avoiding her family ever since.) We're not even sure why THEY weren't the ones dating in the first place.

And yet the solution to this plot hole is staring us in the face. Obviously, the younger sister should have asked Marty to be her beard in high school. That would explain why such a mensch dated one sister even though he was in love with the other one. It would explain why he couldn't share his true feelings. (He has to protect the closeted sister, one element which is sort of used here.) It would explain the stumbling block that kept true love frustrated in the first place. And it would make him even nicer by sacrificing his heart's desire. So why not that motivation?

In an even clunkier move, the bride and the groom "accidentally" had a night of passion and she's pregnant, another excuse for the wedding. That would be a lot more convincing and fun if it had been the plan all along for the four people, rather than a case of infidelity.

So why not let us discover the plot twist early on, piece by piece? First we might realize the groom and the best man are lovers, thinking that's the big secret and the bride is clueless. Then we discover the bride and maid of honor are lovers and think the groom is clueless. Then various folks discover various facets and try to hide or reveal it to one another. Then the best man sleeps with the maid of honor, infuriating the bride and the groom! Then everyone discovers everything and we have a happy ending. Silly. Light. And we get to share in the fun and have things build and build rather than having it all shared at once, followed immediately by a consciousness raising session for P-FLAG. No, it wouldn't raise the quality of the songs or turn bad jokes into Borscht Belt comedy. But at least it would have been consistent in tone and solved a lot of problems. Even a boring wedding can be handled with grace by the guests when there's at least a good piece of cake at the end.

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