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# Theater: *Kinky Boots* Too Vanilla

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**KINKY BOOTS** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**AL HIRSCHFELD THEATRE**

Like drag queens everywhere, Billy Porter in *Kinky Boots* makes the most of old jokes and thin material by offering up an exaggerated delivery and lots of personality. And like drag queens everywhere, he keeps his dignity intact even if you can't help noticing the rather tatty surroundings.

*Kinky Boots* was clearly meant to be a *Full Monty*-style crowd-pleaser. Ironically, the rather minor British film it's based on also had little to recommend it except for a star turn by Chiwetel Ejiofor in the role of the drag queen. He's the sole reason the movie scored the modest box office it did (\$8 million worldwide compared to *The Full Monty's* \$257 million.)

The story on stage is much the same. Our bland hero Charlie (Stark Sands, much better in *Journey's End* a few seasons back) just doesn't have the same passion for the family shoe factory that his dad did. But when pop dies unexpectedly, Charlie feels obliged to leave his materialistic girlfriend/fiance and try and turn the company around before all the employees have to be fired. An unexpected run-in with the scenery-chewing Lola gives Charlie a light bulb moment. She complains that women's shoes can't support the heft of a man and he spots an untapped niche market catering to male cross-dressers who need flashy women's shoes. It won't be easy but they've got three weeks for Lola to become a shoe designer, Charlie to become a boss capable of giving orders and factory workers ready to switch teams from sensible men's shoes to kinky boots. A fashion show in Milan is their last chance to score a success or lose it all..

For a musical about drag queens clashing with burly blue collar males and a factory crushed by outsourcing, this is a tension-free show with almost no sex and only some very minor bumps in the plot. One he-man employee is freaked out by Lola until they go mano-a-mano in the boxing ring and Lola proves her mettle. The mild, affable Charlie has a late night meltdown where instead of urging people on ("I know you can do better work!") he suddenly lashes out that Lola isn't a real man and practically tells one female employee, "You call that stitching, you silly cow?" Okay, he doesn't say that but you kind of wish he did just to wake the show up. Needless to say his outburst is completely out of character and immediately regretted and everyone learns a lesson, like Be Yourself! and Respect Others! and Glitter Is Always A Plus!

Drag is so mainstream it's hard to imagine audiences being titillated by the anonymous drag queens that back Lola up on various numbers or at the fashion show finale. Silly get-ups weren't enough to keep *Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert* afloat and I doubt commercially it will make much difference here. Certainly the show is too polite to offend anyone. Rather unintentionally, there's almost no gay content (not that the show isn't wildly supportive in principal) or even straight content for that matter. You would have thought at least the very fit employee at the shoe factory smiling in the background of many scenes might have come out at some point.

What we do have is rote, by the numbers source material that has not been reinvented by Harvey Fierstein's book or Cyndi Lauper's score. The closest we get to a show-stopper is Annaleigh Ashford, who plays Lauren, the nice girl at the factory we immediately realize is meant for Charlie. She gets the show's most genuine laughs with her awkward crush on him and the comic number "The History Of Wrong Guys." Even here the book and the direction by director/choreographer Jerry Mitchell cheat her of applause. Instead of ending the number with a bang, they cut right into a bit of dialogue that sets up a lame punch line, muting the

cheers Ashford was about to receive. Similarly, the book and music are poorly integrated when Charlie flounders for a solution to the factory's impending demise while Lola does her stage act in a bar. Neither connects with the other; they just seem to get in each other's way. It happens again during the drawn-out Act Two number "What Women Want," another musical number that stops and starts ineffectively.

The show comes to a halt for two big solo turns. Charlie belts out "The Soul Of A Man," with awkward lyric included purely for the play on words of soul and sole. Lola belts out her eleven o'clock number "Hold Me In Your Heart," while performing at a nursing home in drag in the town where she grew up. We're meant to be moved when we discover she's been singing to her father, the man she's been estranged from. But since we don't even know he's alive much less in the nursing home until after the number is over, the impact feels cheap. (For some reason, perhaps because Charlie's dad is dead, we kind of thought Lola's dad was in the past tense too.)

Similarly, Charlie's official girlfriend is out of the picture right at the beginning of the show before we even get a chance to dislike her. (She's one of those romantic entanglements, a person you're allowed to hate so the hero or heroine can overcome an obstacle to their true love.) And did we really need to see the inner child of both Charlie and Lola get a hug from their respective dads at the finale?

Everyone involved has done and will do better work, Fierstein included. I'm a big fan of Lauper's in particular and always felt she was a likely contender for the Grand Slam of creativity: to win all four major awards. She already has Grammys for her great music and an Emmy for her hilarious acting on the sitcom *Mad About You*. I've been waiting for her to tackle a musical for many years so it's quite a disappointment to say her first effort is not up to the best that she can do. Precious little here has the immediate thrill of a pop number and few work as musical theater pieces, though "I'm Not My Father's Son" comes closest to a strong melody. I didn't want a jukebox musical from her, but it's impossible not to note that her classic "True Colors" would have worked perfectly and been a far more powerful number in the show than anything that's actually here. Is it fair to compare them to a standard like that? Well, you should only expect the best from the best.

Mitchell's choreography is routine, amounting mostly to drag queen leg splits and one attempt at innovation with performers dancing on and around a moving assembly line. It wouldn't be easy to have our hero brandish bits of leather and make it interesting but Mitchell doesn't succeed. The lighting by Kenneth Posner is notably muddy and unattractive, with much of the stage in shadows even during the glitziest moments, until the finale where the inevitable bright dazzling lights are brought into play. The costumes by Gregg Barnes are the expected jokey numbers for the drag queens but do what they can; notably they maintain a nice balance between silliness and the real world. They're outlandish but you can actually imagine these gals whipping them up in the real world. At least the boots are kinky and fun -- when Charlie wore a

red knee-high pair during the last number, it was the first time he showed some genuine personality all evening long.

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*Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck"* (FringeNYC) \* 1/2  
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Kinky Boots \*\*

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**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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#### David Finkle: First Nighter: *Kinky Boots* the Musical Is Truly Kinky -- Despite the Kinks

If *Kinky Boots* were judged solely on the merits of its several uproarious numbers and sunspot-bright performances, it would be accounted a runaway hit -- and many happy patrons will do just that.



#### Greg Archer: Cyndi Lauper: Icon Opens Up About New Reality Series, *Kinky Boots* and More

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**Christopher Haase**

18 Fans

1 1

I sometimes feel sorry for reviewers. You sometimes take for granted the power of what is put before you. It's your job to be witty and nitpick things that others can openly enjoy without the scrutiny. I saw Kinky Boots in its pre-Broadway trial in Chicago. I haven't seen the changes made, but I do remember a theatre full of people screaming, clapping and standing at the end of a very... [Read More](#)

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In reply to: [Christopher Haase](#)



**Michael Giltz** ARTICLE AUTHOR

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Hi Christopher,  
Glad you enjoyed the show. You'll be happy to know Kinky Boots got better reviews from most other critics. Of course, when people go to a Broadway show, it's often a once a year or maybe once every few years or once in a lifetime experience and naturally having spent all that money, they want to have a good time. (Tickets are expensive!) It's a rare luxury to go see Broadway... [Read More](#)

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**Mario Golden**

0 Fans

A rather uptight review. I am a Latino immigrant gay theater artist living in New York and a theater goer. I did not pay to see this show, and I ended up feeling it was twice a gift. "Kinky Boots" is a simple yet deep story full of love and goodwill. Both the book and lyrics are heartfelt and soulful and reveal deep reflection about life and what makes it possible for us come together as... [Read More](#)

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