

# Theater: Kristen Chenoweth Becomes a Legend in "On The Twentieth Century"

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**ON THE TWENTIETH CENTURY** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**LONESOME TRAVELER** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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**ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY AT AMERICAN AIRLINES THEATRE**

The bubbly is on tap at the Roundabout for this classy, fun revival of *On The Twentieth Century*. That's bubbly as in champagne and bubbly as in the high spirits of Kristin Chenoweth, who giggles and stomps and twirls her way through the comic role of Lily Garland, a part she was clearly born to play.

Watching her perform this with ease makes clear why exactly *On The Twentieth Century* hasn't been seen on Broadway for a commercial run since 1978. Remember, this Comden & Green and Cy Coleman bit of nonsense ran for a year and launched the careers of Judy Kaye and Kevin Kline. But Lily Garland is hugely demanding vocally and comedically; *On The Twentieth Century* may be the most musically sophisticated score in history for such a silly show. In short, who the hell else could actually tackle this character? She has to sing and dance, trade punches with the fellas AND deliver tunes with the aplomb of a coloratura while making it all look easy. Chenoweth does but precious few others could. This should run as long as Chenoweth and co-star Peter Gallagher are on board but I pity her replacement.

Mind you, this isn't just a revival smoothly delivered by director Scott Ellis, choreographer Warren Carlyle and an excellent creative team. Nips and tucks can be found throughout the show (with additional lyrics by Amanda Green, natch, and additional material by Marco Pennette) from the trims in the overture right through what is essentially a brand new eleven o'clock number for Gallagher's Oscar Jaffe. Tighter transitions, removals of extraneous bits and emotional refocusing of the story all pay off with a streamlined show that barely catches its breath from the madcap introduction to the flourish at the finale. Fun? Absolutely.

Based on the classic play *Twentieth Century* (which led to the Howard Hawks film starring John Barrymore and Carole Lombard), this is the story of a down on his luck producer, broke, hounded by creditors and with a string of flops seemingly dooming him to obscurity. He's traveling on the *Twentieth Century* from Chicago to New York and needs a miracle. But wait! His one-time paramour Lily Garland -- the nobody he turned into a glittering star -- is traveling on the same train. Jaffe has just sixteen hours to discover a play, find backers and convince Lily to sign a contract. By God, he'll do it!

It's all nonsense of course, delivered with charm and style and in this production a modest sense of grounded reality. Jaffe is a monster in John Barrymore's hilarious film depiction, a producer who will do anything, just anything to accomplish his goals. Gallagher pays homage to that self-centered portrayal but -- without spoiling the fun -- he also makes Jaffe an actual, flesh and blood human being. As his sidekicks, Mark Linn-Baker and Michael McGrath are pitch perfect and take their cue from him: often scenery chewing wiseacres as characters, these guys play it relatively low-key and real as well. This all puts the emphasis on romance in this romantic comedy.

On the other hand, this realism doesn't quite pay off in the casting of the great Mary Louise Wilson as the religion-obsessed, independently wealthy Letitia Peabody Primrose, the perfect sap for bankrolling Jaffe's sudden inspiration to turn the story of Mary Magdalene into a Broadway show. Oh Wilson is good; she can't do otherwise. But there's not quite the sense of wacky abandon one might like. And this particular part is actually rather demanding on a physical level; for the big visual gag people still remember from the original, I was more worried about her safety than laughing. I hope she keeps acting for another 20 years but this wasn't the right antic role for her. (Still, great job on the cartwheels, Ms. Wilson!)

Similarly, Andy Karl lets himself down if not the show in the part of Lily's silly movie star lover Bruce Granit. He's fit and fine in the role and clearly having a lot more fun here than in the misbegotten Rocky. But somehow he makes very little impression. When you remember that this same role turned Kevin Kline into a star, the feeling of lost opportunity is inevitable. His big musical number is "Mine" in which both he and Jaffe are singing about Lily while staring into a mirror. They're in separate cars on the train but the audience sees them as unwittingly facing each other down. It's telling that instead of that hilarious one-upmanship you should expect that they both seem to be...staring into a mirror. There's no sense of connection, no comic electricity here.

On the plus side, the Porters -- who serve as the show's Greek chorus -- work like a charm. They've been wisely adjusted from the original's all-black porters of identical height who literally embodied the porter of movie cliché down to a T into four distinct men from smallest to tallest. They wowed the audience from start to finish, including their big number "Life Is Like A Train" which opens Act Two. (And it would take a close comparison of the two shows to figure out exactly why even this song had some apparent additions.) One hates to play favorites but the first among equals was the sexy and charming Rick Faugno, who immediately established a rapport with the crowd.

All the tech elements were superior, from the sets by David Rockwell to the costumes by William Ivey Long to crucial lighting by Donald Holder and flawless sound design by Jon Weston. I assume the ridiculous wig Chenoweth wore at the start as the dowdy Mildred Plotka was part of the fun so Paul Huntley did a great job too. Without actually being lavish in the extreme, they made the show at least look like a million bucks (which is understating matters, but you get the idea).

On *The Twentieth Century* zips by so quickly you almost don't realize how many good songs there are in it. The opener is a terrific scene setter, then Jaffe's character-defining "I Rise Again," the over-the-top "Veronique" (also tweaked to make its storyline clearer, I think), the hilarious "Never," the lovely "Our Private World" (my guest has dibs on that for his wedding song so I hope Chenoweth will be available), then "Repent" and that's just act one. Jaffe's eleven o'clock number, the hilarious and self-absorbed tune "The Legacy" has been turned into a declaration of love called "Because Of Her." That ups the emotional ante and makes this entire production focus on (almost) believable characters pay off. Of course, they're not entirely believable since no one can actually sing like Chenoweth.

She and Gallagher almost seemed a little dampened as the show began when I caught it on a Wednesday. It had just opened and there was also a matinee that day, so you can imagine them running on fumes. As the show moved along, they loosened up and their voices warmed up and it actually helped this particular night build and build. Gallagher delivered in spades while Chenoweth was simply a delight. Five years is too long away from Broadway for her but it was certainly worth the wait. With performances like this, Chenoweth is well on her way of blossoming from a star into a legend.

## LONESOME TRAVELER \*\*

### 59E59

Well, they nailed the earnestness. This well-intentioned but flat-footed and sometimes risible evening of entertainment serves up everything that can make folk music seem hokey and goody-goody. It has educational

passages, heavy-handed sermonizing and sincerity served up by the bucket. The show is rescued ultimately by the very thing it hopes to celebrate: classic folk and blues. So inadvertently, writer and director James O'Neil made his point; folk music will endure, even in the face of musical theater entombment.

I spent half the evening imaging what sort of night I'd create to celebrate folk music. A straight-forward revue would work well (and indeed this same cast would do that just fine). You could also tell the story of folk music's rise and fall (in commercial terms) by taking a more jaundiced look at its journey from angry, fist-raising blues and folk that fired up unions and frightened the power structure into the smoothed out entertainment that became acceptable TV fodder until it was ultimately blown up by Bob Dylan going electric.

But to focus on what we have, it's a survey of folk music -- often very well sung -- that means to educate and entertain about the music's roots, its history, how it reflected and perhaps influenced changing times and continues today with traditionalist purveyors and the likes of Mumford & Sons. It is dutiful and dull anytime the music stops, which thankfully isn't all that often.

It begins with a lovely sing-along on "How Can I Keep From Singing?" and then our narrator, a Pete Seeger-like fellow called Lonesome Traveler who has a penchant for over-explaining and never missing a chance to educate (just like Seeger!) steps up and starts talking. Justin Flagg sings well and delivers the dialogue as best he can.

That's not easy when a scene depicting Alan Lomax doing a field recording is followed by Lonesome Traveler saying, "Ok. Well, as you all saw on the screens it's around 1926 and this fella here came a long way just to get us to sing into that funny little box. A new thing called recording. He said people'd be able to hear us over and over for years to come." He's joined by a black woman called The Muse (her race is important to appreciating the banality of the dialogue she must repeat), played by Jennifer Leigh Warren. She chimes in helpfully, "Helpin' folks remember who we were and what we sung about." Lonesome continues, "That's right. But I coulda told him we'd been passing things along for a good long time already. You see, I know for an absolute fact that I was here long before I was born and I figure I'll be here long after I'm dead." Woman, laughing, "Now, if that doesn't make a lot of sense right now, you just stick around for a time; it's bound to come clear."

If that reads poorly, like some educational show thought up to play high schools in the 1970s, it plays even worse. Act One has a lot of this sort of banal dialogue. Act Two goes more heavily into the songs, but feels the need to include the corny jokes the big acts used to make while appearing in concert or on television. One would have been plenty. You'd never know from this sanitized presentation that folk music was a rebel-rousing, dangerous form of protest -- even though they tell you so.

Very typically, the song "Talking Union" is preceded by a lengthy passage explaining how folk singers felt the working man deserved a decent pay for a decent day's work and on and on about this injustice. Then of course they sing the tune...which makes the same point far more dramatically and effectively. Or at least it would have without the laborious set-up. Is this the sort of thing Pete Seeger and others have in concert, explaining a song that needs no explaining? Yes, so it's "authentic" but not very dramatic.

The singers are good and the arrangements by Dan Wheetman are to my amateur's ears pretty faithful. Act Two opener "There's A Meetin' Here Tonight" does the most effective job of showing how rural tunes and the blues were transformed into commercial folk with a gutbucket version gliding right into a smoother than smooth version your folks might have sung along with on the radio. They aren't making a value statement here and I agree: the first is certainly more moving but both have their charms. This brief passage does point to the road not taken by Lonesome Traveler of demonstrating musically the history and changes in folk music rather than talking about it.

But the presentation! First, the women are for some reason asked to carry the load of goofy, period-setting costume changes. True, the men put on and take off jackets, move from jeans to slacks and so on. But the

women are asked to don headbands and dreadful wigs that emphasize the periods being depicted. This extends to performances of songs by Judy Collins and Joan Baez where they're asked to do imitations and fall flat. All the performances are certainly in the spirit of the originals but only the women are asked to ape them; why, I don't know. Much better if everyone just wore simple outfits and let the music set the scene.

The slideshows that take place throughout are also superfluous. When the time jumps from the early 1940s to the 1950s, do we really need a slide show reminding us of WW II? It's not the fault of multimedia designer David Mickey. I can't think of what slides one could choose to depict the Civil Rights movement other than the ones he chose that wouldn't seem overly familiar. But all the more reason to drop them completely. Other than identifying the acts, there's simply no need for screens and multimedia in the first place.

Far worse, however, is the frankly offensive depiction of blacks throughout the show. The fact that it's done by folks with the best of intentions almost makes it worse. An early scene shows Lomax recording black folk in their homes and it all takes place behind a gauzy screen. OK, I thought, maybe this is just a one-time thing since we've just jumped back in time. But no, time and again, when "authentic" black music is heard, it's often performed by the two black performers stuck behind a gauzy scrim. Anthony Manough spent so much time behind the scrim his whole impression of the audience is probably hazy and indistinct. He is also the lone man to have to don a ridiculous costume, in this case the prison garb that Leadbelly was forced to wear by promoters since audiences wanted the excitement of seeing a genuine jailbird. Yes, the smiling and genial Leadbelly gets out front in a suit later but he delivers that fact with such good nature you'd think it was an amusing misunderstanding rather than offensive.

When they sang "John Henry," Manough was back behind the scrim, his shirt off so we could see the gleaming black man pound away with his hammer. And in the jaw-dropping low point of the show, during one number (I don't even know which one I was so gobsmacked by what I saw), for no conceivable reason we see Manough on the left -- behind a scrim of course -- working in the fields doing some hoeing. On the right we see Warren doing laundry in a bucket, soaping up clothes on a washboard with a do-rag to hold up her hair. Other than the Lomax recording and a campfire sing-along, none of the other actors ever depict everyday activities like this. I honestly expected these two actors to suddenly stop what they were doing and walk off the stage for good.

Despite these indignities and horrible, folksy dialogue filled with down-home wisdom she somehow delivers with a straight face, Warren still managed to sing beautifully and with conviction. She was the show's standout and after all, these are classic songs. On the male side, Matty Charles was excellent as various figures like Woody Guthrie. I always looked forward to whenever he took center stage. (The Ian & Sylvia duet on "Early Mornin' Rain" with Sylvie Davidson was a particular high point.)

But all the performers sang well. That certainly wasn't the problem. It was the entire, dutiful, earnest, repetitive and borderline offensive conception of the show that doomed it. Emotionally, the entire piece built up quite reasonably to Bob Dylan going electric. "It's All Over Now Baby Blue" is the literal climax of the show. I wondered, how would they do it? Strip it down to see what an enduring folk tune it would be even without the plugged-in guitar? Would the "Joan Baez" character do it? One of the men?

Instead, musical director Trevor Wheetman -- who had done superior work on multiple instruments all night, along with Sam Gelfer -- suddenly stepped up to the mike and sang away. Unfortunately, unlike every other person on stage, he is not a good singer. Do they actually think Dylan is not a good singer and it doesn't matter who performs it? (Dylan of course is one of the greatest and most influential singers of all time.) Were they just trying to give him a moment in the spotlight, never mind that it's the crucial climax of the show -- the moment when folk music is almost literally blown away by rock and roll? Wheetman could have performed during the intermission if they wanted to let him enjoy a moment of his own. Squandering the peak of the show to someone who can't even begin to do this classic justice was just the final nail in the coffin.

And still, still my love for folk music (if not my love for singing along) and the general high quality of singing lets me give this evening two stars. It's pleasant if a little boring and not nearly the show that folk music deserves.

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Da no rating

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