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Theater: MasterVoices Delivers Landmark Musical "Of Thee I Sing" With Puckish Pleasure

11/03/2017 02:14 am ET | Updated Nov 03, 2017

OF THEE I SING ** 1/2 out of ****

CARNEGIE HALL

Every time they do a production of the Gershwins' 1931 musical *Of Thee I Sing*, it feels eerily on target. You can read reviews from a decade ago when it was part of City Center's Encores or in London in the 1990s or back and back farther and every single time, people giggle and sigh over how timeless a craven politician and an easily distracted populace prove to be. That's a classic for you. This concert production by MasterVoices ably demonstrates why people keep staging the first musical to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama *and* why it would be a poor choice indeed for a commercial revival.

The songs are fine — sometimes witty, usually at least amusing and never threatening to distract you from the story at hand. It's about a politician running for President who is dogged by a scandal throughout his time in office. Hmmm. Many songs are choral numbers (sung here by a large choir of the sort that a one-night only production can indulge in) or tunes that only a Supreme Court justice would bother to remember. The best is a jokey throw-away about roll call in the US Senate that got a big and deserved laugh.

Tellingly, I sat back during the songs and leaned in during the book scenes, especially the narration by a droll Mo Rocca that is peppered with plot points and background on the show's history. I called it the Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing* but really it's George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind's *Of Thee I Sing*. Here are just a few of the timely details in their plot: John P. Wintergreen is running for President but needs a hook. He decides on a bland platform of "love" (who can object?) and his advisers come up with a great stunt. They stage beauty contests all over the country, the finalists from each state compete in Atlantic City and the winner marries the bachelor (and presumably future President) Wintergreen. Seriously, it's about a Presidential candidate who hosts a beauty pageant in Atlantic City to promote his candidacy.

Real romance interferes, albeit a lickety-split romance with an assistant named Mary Turner that begins and blossoms and peaks all in the two minutes before the winner of the pageant is announced. Wintergreen and his true love of course shun the spotlight and never dream of exploiting their relationship. Ha! They travel the

country and in every state he proposes to her all over again in front of vast crowds, promising that if voters will just make him President why then he can marry his sweetheart and be the happiest man alive. His inauguration combines a swearing-in and a marriage. Toss in an accusation of Russian interference in the election, a President who spends all his time on vacation, a woman who claims the President used her and then tossed her aside and no wonder the audience spent most of the evening laughing ruefully.

You can't help describing the plot because the damn thing is so amusingly modern, at least as presented in a concert adaptation by Tommy Krasker, with narration/historical context offered up by the effortlessly funny Joe Keenan. The score is certainly clever-clever — endlessly quoting campaign songs of the past and other patriotic numbers. But at best the highlights “Love Is Sweeping The Country” and the title track (baby!) are minor entrants in the bulging Gershwin songbook. When I think of the best moments of the show, they came when people weren't singing, such as how Bryce Pinkham as Wintergreen devoured a delicious corn muffin or Kevin Chamberlin as the Vice President timidly joined a tour group just so he could get a peek at the Oval Office.

Chamberlin was a treat, Elizabeth Stanley chewed the scenery appropriately as the wronged beauty pageant winner and Chuck Cooper is the sort of talent that invariably makes theater goers say, “Oh he's *always* good.” (I also enjoyed the amiable presence of Rhett Guter in several minor bits.) As the First Lady, Denée Benton had a minor off night vocally (perhaps under the weather?). I've seen her twice on Broadway and she's been sterling both times. Here her acting chops and presence carried her through. Bryce Pinkham as Wintergreen really shone in the comic dialogue and wowed vocally, albeit modulating nicely when singing with Benton so

as not to overwhelm her voice. They made a fine team. And while Rocca was indeed blessed with great words to say thanks to Keenan, he stole the evening as the Narrator, even if Chamberlin might demand a recount.

Conductor and director Ted Sperling led the MasterVoices Orchestra and that huge choir with verve. They certainly gave the songs as good a presentation as one could ask. The MasterVoices season continues with Mahler's Symphony No. 3 on Nov. 8, Handel's *Messiah* on Dec. 9 and an ambitious evening of songs by immigrants and their children on March 7, 2018 called *Our America*. However, the sound design of Patrick Pummill was notably lacking — I strained at times to hear dialogue and lyrics clearly amidst the bounce-back of the gorgeous Carnegie Hall. And words were all this night.

The original Broadway production was such a big hit that they delivered a sequel. In *Let 'em Eat Cake*, President Wintergreen loses reelection and leads an armed revolution! He bribes the military, deposes the government, puts the Supreme Court in chains and declares a dictatorship for the working man. I've never heard a note of it and if it means the sequel's plot remains happily outlandish and absurd and *not* prescient, well I hope I never do.

Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

The Liar *** 1/2

Jitney *** 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) *** 1/2

Significant Other * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) ** (third visit, but *** if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) ** 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) *** 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) ****

The Light Years * 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) *** 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips **

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) *

Come From Away *

Miss Saigon **

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba * 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s **

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) ***

Latin History For Morons * 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

War Paint **

In and Of Itself ***

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) ***

The Antipodes **

Anastasia **

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory **

Oslo *** 1/2

The Little Foxes **

Groundhog Day ** 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O'Hara at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra **

A Doll's House, Part 2 *** 1/2

Bandstand ** 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) ***

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) **

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) ** 1/2

Rooms **

Arlington ***

All The President's Men (Public Theater one-night event at Town Hall) ** 1/2

Happy Days (w Dianne Wiest) *** 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret *** 1/2

The Whirligig * 1/2

Sojourners and Her Portmanteau **

Broadway By The Year 1997-2006 ***

The Boy Who Danced On Air ** 1/2

The Government Inspector ** 1/2

A Doll's House, Part 2 (with Julie White and Stephen McKinley Henderson) ***

Desperate Measures ***

The Honeymooners **

People, Places & Things **

M. Butterfly * 1/2

Red Roses, Green Gold no stars

Of Thee I Sing (MasterVoices concert presentation at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

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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.

