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Theater: Matthew Broderick's New Musical Is Modestly 'Nice Work'

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NICE WORK IF YOU CAN GET IT ** out of **** IMPERIAL THEATRE

Everyone knows that the hardest part of creating a new musical is writing good songs. A good tune will let audiences forgive a host of ills in the book and sets and costumes. So if you begin by plundering the vaults of

George and Ira Gershwin, your task should be much easier. All you need to do is whip up a frothy, silly plot; cast some charming leads; string together those standards and -- voila! -- you've got a hit show. Heck, they did it 20 years ago with *Crazy For You*. Let's do it again!

Nice Work If You Can Get It proves that it's not as easy as all that.

They have the silly plot. It's about a millionaire playboy named Jimmy destined for his fourth doomed-to-fail marriage when he falls head over heels in love with a tough-talking but lovable female bootlegger named Billie. She uses his weekend mansion to stash some hooch, his potential in-laws include a New York Senator and a Prohibitionist who can smell liquor a mile away and everyone sings and dances and woos the night away.

They have the charming leads. Kelli O'Hara has gone from strength to strength in *South Pacific* and *The Pajama Game*, to name just two recent successes. As Billie, she sings like an angel, dances with aplomb and shows a flair here for physical comedy. Matthew Broderick is Jimmy. It must be said: he has a modest voice and isn't much of a dancer, but somehow he has willed himself into a genuine musical comedy star and we love him. The audience is always on his side and if there are any jokes in the book, he'll land them like a pro. He walks on stage and you smile. He dances awkwardly and you smile. His voice fades a bit on the big numbers and you smile.

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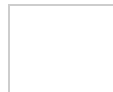
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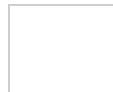
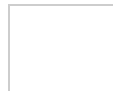


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The problems, funnily enough, start with the songs. Needless to say, if these were original songs we heard for the first time, your jaw would drop with delight. But we've heard these songs a thousand times. First, you have to *earn* the right to use these tunes. They don't give you a free pass; in fact, they increase your burden. You can't just plop the songs in anywhere and by gosh, they better fit the moment or they'll feel random.

For example, very early in the show O'Hara sings "Someone To Watch Over Me" after meeting the wealthy Jimmy (Broderick). She sings it beautifully, of course, and it's a standard in every sense of the word. But does it fit this character at this moment? I suppose you could pretend we're seeing another side of her and I'm being too picky, but everything we've been told about Billie and most everything we'll see for the rest of the show is that she's a plucky, self-sufficient gal with a better head for business than he'll ever have or want. She doesn't need protecting and someone better watch over their jewels or she'll swipe 'em, thank you very much. The incongruity of this character singing this song is turned into a joke by having her cradle a rifle. But she doesn't need a rifle; what Billie needs here is a song about *refusing* to be in love, about standing on her own two feet and not needing a man to rescue her. She's no princess in a tower and what Jimmy loves about her is exactly that: her independence and smarts

She does it again in Act Two when Billie sings "But Not For Me." At this point, I guess I should accept that she's a secret romantic but really I was thinking after hearing these two songs and the title tune, why didn't they just revive *Crazy For You?* (That show contains all three numbers.) The placement of the songs began to feel random; any tune could be sung by any characters in any order and it wouldn't matter terribly much.

This wouldn't be so important if every other element of the show were strong. The sheer quality of the tunes should win you over. But that's hardly the case. The story wisely gives all the secondary characters their own storylines and motivations. The dim-witted bootlegger Duke (Chris Sullivan) lets Jeannie (Robyn Hurder) believe he's an English duke and about to become King of England. (It's that kind of show.) The clever Cookie (Michael McGrath working overtime) finds himself posing as a butler to keep an eye on their hooch but inexplicably falling for the alcohol-despising, moralistic Duchess Estonia Dulworth (Judy Kaye). Plus everyone is wondering who the mysterious Brown Beard might be, the bootlegger running the whole show that none of them have ever unmasked.

Amidst all this craziness, the show forgets to put any real obstacles in the way of Jimmy and Billie. His fiancée Eileen Evergreen (Jennifer Laura Thompson, trying hard to channel Madeline Kahn) becomes an afterthought; right at the finale she becomes a daddy's girl who demands her way a la the ending of the classic comedy *Arthur*, but it's too little too late. And for much of Act Two the romance of Billie and Jimmy fades into the background while all the other lovers elbow their way into the spotlight. Duchess and Cookie have a big number together and then in the blink of an eye they have *another* big number together. And then they reprise it again a little later. Plus, they forget the first rule of comedy: threes. A modest but effective gag involves playing "Rhapsody In Blue" for a brief moment when two people kiss. They do it once. We laugh. They do it twice. We laugh.... And then they don't do it a third time?

At least they were being over-ambitious with the script. The sets by Derek McLane are under-ambitious. The world for these glossy musicals about the frivolously rich should be glamorous and appealing. McLane had money to burn on *Follies*, *Ragtime* and *How To Succeed* and those shows benefitted. Their sets were clever (*Succeed*), protean (*Ragtime*) or at least eye-popping (*Follies*).

Here the elements are perfunctory at best. Some architectural touches at the mansion jut out at the front of the building and also jut out when you're in the back. A squat, ugly fountain dominates one dance sequence but since it was so prominent and unprepossessing I assumed the jug held so prominently by the statue which pointed directly at the audience would somehow come into play. Surely there was some purpose to this and water or confetti or champagne or *something* would splash out of it? Alas, no; it's merely squat and ugly.

Jimmy's bedroom is an orange-ish fever dream with stripes on the walls and ugly patterned curtains and unseemly bedcovers all clashing and fighting with one another for your attention. It's not tacky enough to make some point about Jimmy's cluelessness when it comes to nice things and how he needs a woman's touch. (Though God knows, the room certainly does.) it's just distracting. A lack of imagination prevails throughout with the finale taking place in a narrow space at the front of the stage with a so-so backdrop to indicate a change of scene before they wheel out that fountain again and sing "They All Laughed,"



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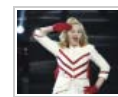


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which at least includes a line about taking a bow to make it fit.

The costumes by Martin Pakledinaz are generally better, though a would-be comic moment with chorus girls popping out of a tub wearing bubble-draped clothing isn't much of a sight gag. In general, the gals are dressed sexily and appealingly, though why they ruin Billie's cute maid outfit with an ugly paper hat is beyond me. (Just take it off, Kelli.) The male dancers fare less well. They're introduced as the vice squad of that enemy of demon rum, Duchess Dulworth. They guys come out in *Guys & Dolls*-style gangster suits with wide pinstripes. It was so out of appearance with their task as enforcers of morality and the law, I imagined it was a clue. Was the Duchess in fact the Brown Beard, that mysterious bootlegging boss? Nope, it's just an odd and misleading choice of clothing.

Director and choreographer Kathleen Marshall has done better work. That vice squad comes out onstage in a weird, blocky move with their arms held awkwardly at their sides, teetering back and forth like robots. I'm not quite sure why, even when it was reprised later. One deft touch was placing the male dancers on the floor and have Broderick slide across them like a pastry on a conveyor belt.

In Marshall's defense, Broderick seems awfully limited, perhaps because of back surgery? His charmingly awkward dancing worked well in that 1995 revival of *How To Succeed* and when playing the nerdy accountant in *The Producers*. But this show calls for a genuine leading man who can sing and dance. Broderick has charm to spare and Marshall works around him as much as she can. But during at least one big dance number with O'Hara, it felt as if we were watching a run-through where Broderick was making sure he had his moves down and would amp up the energy when the real performance began.

All that said, with this cast and those songs, it's not a bad night at the theater, just a disappointing one. It's quickly forgotten but you won't be miserable while watching it. How could you, with Broderick squeezing every laugh he can out of Joe DiPietro's book and O'Hara singing like a lark? The supporting cast do their bit with energy. Judy Kaye doesn't don a lampshade but she does swing from the chandeliers to goose up the energy and Michael McGrath is a good foil. If there was more of a show to steal, they'd steal it. Everyone else appeals, with Hurder in particular lingering in my mind with sex appeal and spunk for a much bigger role.

And a few touches worked quite well. They turned "By Strauss" and "Sweet and Lowdown" into a competitive duet between the Duchess and Cookie that puts those two standards in a fresh context. Best of all is the silly, throw-away scene where Broderick serenades O'Hara with a ukulele and a collegiate contingent of Whiffenpoof-like singers pop in out of nowhere to provide backup. It makes no sense, it's goofy and illogical and it's a quiet delight that captures the charm they were probably shooting for all along.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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Cara Joy David: In Support of Jennifer Laura Thompson

Thompson has just the right mix of vocal prowess and slapstick ability. Nice Work If You Can Get It is far from the best thing she's ever done but her genius is apparent in her featured role, like a combination of Christine Ebersole and Madeline Kahn.

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3fingerbrown
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02:44 PM on 04/25/2012

Good thorough review -- I like it when a critic takes the time to describe the sets and costumes.

The consensus of this and other reviews I've read are pretty much what I expected. But, hell, I'd pay a hundred bucks to watch Kelli O'Hara defrost her freezer. I fell over-the-moon in love with her in "South Pacific" and I'll follow here anywhere -- even to "Nice Work If You Can Get It" if necessary.

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freelance writer
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04:58 PM on 05/11/2012

Thanks for commenting. I don't always have useful comments to make about the technical elements, but try to remember there's more to a show than just the stars and the songs. You'll certainly have spent your money well if you're a fan of O'Hara; she's a lot of fun as always and yes, South Pacific was one of the best revivals I'd seen since Carousel almost a decade earlier and O'Hara was a big reason.

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