

Theater: Megan Mullally's Triumph; Idina Menzel's Bust

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GUYS AND DOLLS *** 1/2 out of ****

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CARNEGIE HALL

Frank Loesser must be the most happy fella in musical theater heaven right. His two greatest shows have just been performed in New York City in productions that could open on Broadway to rapturous acclaim. [The Most Happy Fella is playing at City Center's Encores through April 6](#) and was showered with acclaim. (What I wouldn't do to beg, borrow, or steal a ticket!)

And for one night only, Guys And Dolls was given a benefit performance at Carnegie Hall. (One night only? That's crueller than rolling snake eyes when you've got \$5,000 riding on the outcome!) But big deal, right? What could be easier than mounting a production of this sure-fire musical comedy smash filled with great songs? Ha! In fact, Guys And Dolls has only been successfully revived once, back in 1992. Most recently, Craig Bierko, Lauren Graham and Oliver Platt tackled it in 2009 in a version that ran for mere weeks. I saw a pleasant take on it in London with Ewan McGregor as Sky Masterson. He has a thin but personable voice and charmed his way through the part with conviction; unfortunately he was surrounded with several other actors with vocal limitations and that kept it from taking off as well.

So anyone who has seen tepid revivals of Broadway classics knows that it ain't easy to get it right, even when the musical itself is a knock-out. But they sure made it look easy on Thursday night. From the opening moment, when director Jack O'Brien had gangsters wander onstage, stare slack-jawed at the audience and peek over the shoulders of the orchestra, this Guys And Dolls was firing on all cylinders.

The always too-brief "Fugue For Tindhorns" kicked things off and the cast never looked back. Any modest caveats were due simply to the one-night nature of this event. And after weeks of hearing new shows on Broadway and off sung with wavering ability, it was a pleasure and a joy to hear every single part delivered by glorious voices. (With the amusing exception of Steve Schirripa from The Sopranos, who played Big Jule and seemed to be awkwardly mouthing the words when asked to join in the chorus; even that made me smile.)

The story is simplicity itself. Nathan Detroit needs to find a safe joint to hold his crap game, but the cops are putting the squeeze on his usual haunts. Also putting the squeeze on Detroit is his long-suffering fiancee Adelaide, who wants to get married already. It's been 14 years and people are starting to talk! Desperate for funds, Detroit makes a can't-miss bet with the gambler Sky Masterson that Sky can't whisk a prim missionary named Sarah Brown off to dinner in Havana, Cuba. Romance blossoms, jokes are told and hilarious, wonderful songs tumble out one after another.

Nathan Lane was born to play Nathan Detroit and obviously his parents knew it. He's probably incapable of giving less than 200% but even so, it's wonderful that after doing the part for so long, he can still tackle it with gusto and wit and charm and make you feel it's opening night. Sierra Boggess is a wonderful Sarah Brown. She makes this sweetheart trying to help others truly sweet, rather than prim. Her highlight was "If I Were A Bell,"

which she delivered with comic aplomb and hilarious physical comedy. What a wonderful, old-fashioned instrument she has. And what a pity she's only appeared on Broadway in *The Little Mermaid*, *Master Class* and *The Phantom Of The Opera*, which she returns to on May 12.

The great Len Cariou brought warmth to his second act plea to Sarah to embrace love with "More I Cannot Wish You." As happened so often during the performance, at the end of his song, they would pause in place as the applause grew and grew. John Treacy Egan and Christopher Fitzgerald killed with the title number and Egan savored every moment of the show-stopper "Sit Down, You're Rockin' The Boat." Choreography was a trickier task, but the hoofers shone on "The Crapshooters Dance." Heck, even conductor and musical director Rob Fisher got into the act, serving up drinks, wandering off with chorus girls and generally having a grand time. The Orchestra of St. Luke's was in top form, as well.

As Sky Masterson, Patrick Wilson is awkward casting. He has an innate, Gary Cooper-like decency that is all wrong for the dangerous and magnetic gambler. This guy needs reforming? This guy is dangerous? He'd shame a Boy Scout with his trustworthiness, honesty and square-jawed dignity. That said, Wilson sang the part terrifically well and made it easy to understand why a do-gooder missionary would fall for him. On the other hand, it made Nathan Detroit seem like a schmuck for not assuming any girl would fall for Sky in a heartbeat.

It's too easy to pass over Nathan Lane. Of course he's great. But having missed that 1992 revival (Sue me! I was poor and it was a smash.), nothing can match seeing him deliver this iconic part with gusto. Surely it helped that he was paired with Megan Mullally as Adelaide. The great triumph of this benefit concert was to find the heart of the story. The show always delivers laughs but with Mullally (and Boggess) it also had genuine emotion.

It's a dreadful shame that Mullally has only appeared in two shows since debuting on Broadway as a bit player in *Grease*. She had her breakout role in *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying* and then a key turn in the woebegone musical *Young Frankenstein*. That's it! Pairing her with Adelaide was almost too perfect casting. How could you not expect comic heaven and then churlishly say she fell short?

Guided by the sure hand of director O'Brien, Mullally did much more than knock out a comic gem like "Adelaide's Lament." She created a full, fascinating character, brought her to life and made you love her as much as Nathan Detroit does. It's easy to make Adelaide a scatter-brained ditz. Mullally chose instead to make her fully aware of her predicament, without sacrificing the laughs, either. At the Hot Box Nightclub, she was wonderfully good on "A Bushel And A Peck" and "Take Back Your Mink." Her body curved deliciously this way and that, with her bum seeming to stick out so much it could be a very sexy end table whenever she kissed her man.

And her "Adelaide's Lament" was a joy. Too often, musical numbers that become famous show-stoppers encourage people to aggressively hawk their greatness. I recently saw a woman sing "I Can Cook, Too" from *On The Town* and she was selling it so hard from the start that I wasn't buying. Here Mullally uses her considerable chops to elevate Adelaide from an empty-headed dingbat to a real girl in love. She delivered the song with self-aware deprecation; this is one cookie who knows exactly what's going on, but darn it she loves the guy. It made the song very funny but also quite moving.

Mullally carried that triumph through the rest of the show, from the even more plaintive "Adelaide's Second Lament" to her great duet with Lane on "Sue Me" (her vocals were rat-a-tat perfection) to the final "Marry The Man Today" with Boggess, a song that should scare the bejeezus out of any commitment-phobic man. When Nathan Detroit sings that he loves her, it's not strictly because she's the sexiest gal in town but something far deeper and more meaningful. That takes the story to another level and gives this *Guys And Dolls* a genuine beating heart.

Mullally's work was musical comedy of the highest order. And she was surrounded by talent making the most of this one night revival. The only flaw was that the audience couldn't tell their friends to rush out and buy tickets

right away.

Here's the Tony Awards performance from the legendary 1992 revival, which also starred Nathan Lane.

IF/THEN * 1/2 out of ****

RICHARD RODGERS THEATRE

With *Rent* and *Wicked* and the feature film *Frozen* to her credit, it's no surprise that Tony winner Idina Menzel was packing them in for the very first preview of the new musical *If/Then*. From the creators of *Next To Normal*, it's the story of a woman in New York City and how our lives might take drastically different courses. One afternoon, she fatefully if innocently must choose between attending a protest with her best friend or hanging out with a new one, between answering her cell phone and letting it go to voicemail. As the show progresses, we watch this person's life branch out: in one, she's happily married to a soldier, raising children and teaching; in another she has a very successful career as an urban planner.

The fatal problem with *If/Then* is that neither of these lives are terribly interesting. They certainly don't reflect or play off one another in any telling or revealing way. The simple fact that both are happening at the same time doesn't make them dramatically engaging. Both lives are pretty darn great (though clearly we're meant to favor the warmth of family over career). The result is a musical that is stillborn with nothing to offer other than that initial *Sliding Doors*-like gimmick. It's almost curiously bad on every level.

I respected *Next To Normal* by Tom Kitt (music) and Brian Yorkey (book and lyrics), but I didn't love it like others. Still, with that show's critical acclaim and solid commercial appeal, it was exciting to anticipate what they might do next. Perhaps they were given too much carte blanche or the modest challenge of presenting two parallel storylines sucked up all their energy. Whatever went wrong, it was complete.

Early word that it was hard to tell which "reality" we were in from moment to moment was overblown. It's pretty straightforward: in one reality our hero Elizabeth (Menzel) wears glasses and loves her soldier husband Josh (a strapping James Snyder). Her best friend Lucas (Anthony Rapp) -- who is bisexual -- meets and falls in love with the soldier's best friend, a doctor no less (the very appealing Jason Tam). In the other reality, she's lured into becoming an urban planner for New York City and does great things, shaping the lives of people, helping remarkable projects happen and even incorporating the needs and desires of activists like Lucas (though it's awfully hard to turn an additional 1000 units of low income housing into a rousing number). Lucas, by the way, spends this reality pining for Elizabeth. In both, she's got the support of Kate (the welcoming presence of LaChanze), who will be the first to tell you she's one hell of a good kindergarten teacher.

That's it. We follow her storylines and each one is dull, albeit filled with the usual ups and downs of life. It's not like one decision leads to tragedy and another to triumph or we revel in the clever ways her lives play off one another. Again, the career path is slightly less rosy, with Elizabeth hitting on her married boss and remaining single. But in both she becomes pregnant, in both she has great guys asking her to be with them forever. In both she is as in control of her destiny as any human can be. (Tragedy and outside forces naturally factor in, as they will.)

I must assume the creative team is not so retrograde as to suggest a woman choosing a career path is unfulfilled and miserable. Still, they come awfully close with abortion and that possible affair seeming to drag Elizabeth down. But really, since her boss clearly has feelings for her and repeatedly says his marriage is all but dead, would it be so dreadful if he left his wife and they got together? If this musical wanted to show a woman making one bad decision after another, they needed more than kissing a man who shows up at your apartment unannounced at 9:30 at night with a lame excuse about why he's there.

So what does this elaborate structure reveal? Why did it drive the creation of *If/Then*? Surely Kitt and Yorkey realized it's actually a cliché to talk about how one fateful decision (however innocuous) can change your life.

Whatever their intentions, the banal nature of the stories being told leads to muddled work by all involved.

The set design by Mark Wendland and lighting by Kenneth Posner are a mess. The set has a vague, split-level structure. When they're in the park, trees float in the air. Once in a while, people stand on a raised platform, sometimes for a good reason (they're on a fire escape or roof), more often for not. But it's a muddy, unclear and almost entirely unnecessary visual plan. Similarly, the lighting comes into play when the setting is more abstract; sometimes there are green blobs in the background, sometimes they're blue or silver.

The costumes and wigs make no impression but the vocal arrangements by Annmarie Milazzo are notably awkward and discordant. On even the sloppiest shows, when the cast raises its voice in song, usually the sound is appealing. Here, the voices almost never blend well, though I blame the score and songs far more. Indeed, there's a vague, acoustic guitar vibe lost in the mix during the opening number (the sound is by Brian Ronan and, again, you can't make something bad sound good). Numbers glide by without leaving any impression whatsoever, especially in the first act.

The program does not list individual songs, but things improve a tad in the second act. A song I'll call "Walking By A Wedding" has some specific and vivid lines that actually reveal our heroine's innermost feelings in a fresh way. And Snyder as the soldier husband Josh has a pretty good number about being an expectant dad. That's it, with Menzel's 11 o'clock number of empowerment falling flat, even though the audience has been waiting the entire evening for the actress to unleash those steel-clad, Merman-like pipes of hers and really let loose.

The choreography of Larry Keigwin involves some desultory twirling and a few angular moves and little else, though the dancers -- led by the hard-working and personable Curtis Holbrook -- did what they could with this modest fare. The direction by Michael Greif (*Rent*, *Grey Gardens*, *Next To Normal*) is workmanlike but anonymous, just like the material.

With such generic characters, what can you say about the actors? LaChanze is a warm, appealing presence when she arrives, but is so unnecessary to the story she slowly fades into the background. Rapp is simply forced to glide by on the nebbishy charm he's often been forced to repeat ever since *Rent*. The deadly dull book is at its worst with jokes about his activism, with dreadful jokes about dining at Applebee's and other mediocre gibes. One feels sorry for this talent. Snyder is certainly a handsome actor but the role of Josh begins and ends with one trait: Nice Guy in a Uniform. This is a Lifetime TV movie and the show doesn't care about him at all; he has no personality, no drive, no quirks, no details that remotely bring this half of the show's romance to life.

Stephen (Jerry Dixon) is the boss who is constantly tracking down Elizabeth and offering her the job opportunities of a lifetime, which she annoyingly rejects until he finally forces her into them. Dear god, where's this man in my life? But again, his "troubled" marriage (he bitches, but it's actually fine) and his fairy tale godfather desire to grant Elizabeth's wishes are all we ever know about him. Tam is very believable as a love interest for Lucas but only because of the actor's innate charm; he too has no particular personality and just sweeps Lucas out of a squatter's nightmare into his home with an organic garden in the background. Tamika Lawrence can do nothing with the assistant Elena because like every other character in the show, Elena feels anonymous and dispensable.

Menzel is lost amidst all this jumping around. Since the book doesn't show Elizabeth becoming a particularly different sort of person in either reality, it's basically the same person in both tales. She can't differentiate between them (other than whipping her glasses on and off) because the show hasn't done so either. Sure, she can belt it out at the end, but nothing sounds more empty than a big note being held in a vacuous song. It's a shame she waited ten years to return to Broadway with this.

SPOILER: As the final, almost laughable nail in the coffin, the show ends in a remarkable way. Surely the entire purpose of *If/Then* was to show how decisions both large and small can take our life in dramatically different directions. But they absurdly undercut this idea at the last second. In the storyline where Elizabeth chose

marriage and children, she is still handed the plum assignment of a lifetime: the remodeling of a new Penn Station. In the storyline where Elizabeth chose an important and satisfying career, she still gets to meet and fall in love with the Josh, the soldier man of her dreams. So no matter what you choose, you can have it all? Huh? END OF SPOILER

If they wanted to show how different paths can lead to the same destination, the show needed to be rewritten from top to bottom. Of course, it needed that anyway.

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