



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

Theater: Musical "Desperate Measures" Measures Up

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DESPERATE MEASURES *** out of ****

YORK THEATRE COMPANY

If you can't get a man with a gun, it's even harder to hunt down a good old-fashioned musical comedy. But *Desperate Measures* is exactly that, a happy surprise of a show filled with enjoyable songs, a talented cast and enough energy to let you overlook its natural desire to give everyone a turn in the spotlight. That just means the show can easily get tighter and better, so see it before it moves into a bigger theater (or tickets become scarce).

Adapted from Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure*, the story is transplanted easily to the Wild West, where the cowboy Johnny Blood is due for hanging after he got a chorus gal pregnant. The stern Governor Richterhenkenpflichtgetruber — hello, Mel Brooks! — is in no mood for clemency...until the cowpoke's sister Susanna shows up and begs for clemency. She's due to take her vows as a Catholic nun (and has a rosary big enough to lasso a bull to prove it) but her pleas don't give rise to thoughts of heaven in the Governor. He promises to offer freedom to her brother if she offers up her virginity. Heavens! Susanna and a kind-hearted sheriff cook up a cockamamie plot to dupe the governor with a substitute offering of the local hooker. Toss in a drunken Irish priest who doesn't believe in God and you've got yourself a show.

Director and choreographer Bill Castellino does strong work in the intimate York Theatre, keeping the show buoyant, only pausing for the requisite ballad. Similarly, the costumes by Nicole Wee and scenic design of James Morgan are fun but never "funny." (There's nothing worse than a costume or a set desperate for a laugh.) More importantly, with Castellino taking his cue from the book and lyrics, this isn't a jokey satire of the genre, just a solid example of the musical comedies that once reigned supreme.

So we're not in Carol Burnett territory. The cast has fun but they're not too broad. The governor is a villain...but he's not a moustache-twirling one. The hooker has a heart of gold...but isn't averse to the idea of being the governor's wife. The sheriff is good and true...but ready to look the other way if the mildly dim-witted Johnny Blood will make his getaway. And Susanna may be about to take her vows...but clearly she wouldn't mind being talked out of it by the Sheriff.

The clever book and lyrics are by Peter Kellogg, who once hit Broadway with the musical *Anna Karenina* and the music is by David Friedman. Both have admirable music theater credits of the sort you'll find from anyone who loves the theater, is good enough to get significant work but has yet to quite break through. Given a chance to do what they've been burning to do, this team delivers a show that at the very least should enjoy a long life in regional productions.

The opening number "The Ballad Of Johnny Blood" sets up the story deftly, letting us know the sort of show we're in for by climaxing with a noose falling from the rafters and the entire cast squealing in good-natured fear. Other comic highlights include "Good To Be Alive," "It Doesn't Hurt To Try" and the legs-up "It's A Beautiful Day For A Lifelong Commitment." A four piece pit puts them over with arrangements that make the most of the versatile musicians.

Like the creative team, the show features a cast that has worked steadily in countless venues. Given the chance to strut their stuff in an original piece, they shine. Nick Wyman strikes just the right tone as the scheming Governor who is unexpectedly drawn to Susanna. Lauren Molina has a blast in the comic role of Bella Rose, the hooker (I mean, showgirl!). Gary Marachek makes the most of the padre and Emma Degerstedt sings nicely in the least fun part of Susanna, often playing the straight man to her fellow actors with good grace and charm. She's a find, as were Conor Ryan as the doomed Johnny Blood and Peter Saide as the sheriff. The charming Ryan has great fun with his slow-on-the-uptake but kind cowboy, especially on the raucous duet "Just For You" with Molina. This "Anything you can do, I can do better" number is the show's best and they score mightily with it. Saide has a very welcome, Timothy Olyphant-like sexiness to him, getting a lot of laughs from a few words and partnering nicely with Degerstedt. As with everyone in this show,

I immediately poured over their credits, as good a sign of talent being spotted as I can name.

A few bits go on too long. A “mirror” routine in which Susanna and Bella ape each other’s actions could be cut, as could a subplot involving the padre and his pen-pal relationship with Nietzsche. Keeping the sheriff’s friendly gesture of faking a letter from the philosopher would be fine, but there’s no need to have the ruse revealed, the priest go off the wagon and then recover by the end. It’s the fault of a show that naturally wants to give every member of its six person cast a chance to shine. But that generosity isn’t always what’s best for the show. For example Susanna has a ballad in the second act that feels unnecessary, however prettily she sings; her solo in Act One is plenty. In a sign of the show’s strength, I didn’t spot any truly weak songs. Yet Act One felt a little full, about the strongest critique I can offer a breezy, fun evening. Cutting one or two numbers (along with the comic bits mentioned) will speed up an already trim show and make it even stronger.

Any changes they make won’t be out of desperation. Fearing a night of hamminess and schtick, I discovered some very good actors to keep an eye on (in every sense of the phrase), a solid production led by director Castellino and a clutch of songs by Kellogg and Friedman I’m eager to hear again. By any measure, that’s a happy ending.

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 ***

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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.