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## Theater: New Broadway Musical *Lysistrata Jones* An Air Ball

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*"LYSISTRATA JONES"* \* out of \*\*\*\*  
[WALTER KERR THEATRE](#)

This thin idea for a sketch on *Saturday Night Live* -- much less a full-fledged musical -- has an appealing if generally vocally challenged cast let down by the book of award-winning playwright Douglas Carter Beane (*Sister Act*) and the music and lyrics of his collaborator (both professionally and personally) Lewis Flinn. This is surely one of the first if not the first time an openly gay couple has created a Broadway musical. Sadly, that happy bit of trivia is the most memorable thing about the show.

The story is a spin on the Greek play by Aristophanes in which women strive to end the Peloponnesian War by withholding sexual favors until their men stop fighting. In our show, new college student Lysistrata Jones (Patti Murin) starts dating basketball player Mick (Josh Segarra) but is, like, totally bummed he and the other guys on the team don't really try. They've lost every game this season (and pretty much every game as long as anyone can remember). Before you can say Buffy, the bubbly Lysistrata recruits the other girlfriends of the athletes to proclaim "No More Giving It Up" until the guys actually triumph. Instead of stopping fighting, these girls want their men to *start* fighting, or at least *caring* about whether they win. Ultimately, the message of the show is that negatively insisting "no sex until you win" isn't nearly as powerful as inspiring them with love, but it's a long road to get there.

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Along the way, we meet two non-cheerleaders and non-jocks: librarian Robin (Lindsay Nicole Chambers, doing her level best) who delivers "hilarious" spoken word poetry slams and announces her attraction to Lysistrata (though that idea is immediately dropped) and nerdy social activist Xander (the cute Jason Tam, presumably named in tribute to the character in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*). He seems like a gay character and you assume he'll fall for one of the guys on the team, but this too is a misdirection since Xander falls for Lysistrata.

It's all presided over by Hetaira, a Greek goddess of sorts who also doubles as the madam of a whore house the girls turn to for practical advice and the guys turn to for release when the pressure gets too much. Liz Mikel plays this dual role and despite several unflattering costumes and a character that makes you cringe with its "winking" cliched nature, Mikel through sheer stage presence and charm (and some real pipes) somehow manages to maintain her dignity.

The same could be said for the rest of the cast. Cindy Tolan is the casting director and while almost no one here other than Mikel has a strong voice, they are uniformly appealing as actors and comics. Star Patti Murin was an understudy on *Xanada* (which Tolan cast and Beane wrote the book for) and that's no surprise. Just like Kerry Butler, Murin is a delightful personality who holds the stage with ease and makes this foolishness almost seem worthwhile. She's no belter but her voice has a charm in the quiet moments. You can easily see Murin on TV, film and stage comedies. Segarra is weaker in the singing (though also not bad in his one quiet song "When She Smiles") and the book doesn't allow him to really create a convincing jock who is a closet lover of poetry. But Segarra has charisma and would have made a good Sweathog in the days of *Welcome Back, Kotter* -- he plays dumb, but lovable very nicely.

Tam has an even worse role, usually saddled with the joke costume of the team mascot. In his big number "Hold On," Tam is saddled with ridiculous hand gestures that make it look as if he's interpreting for the blind. He too is not much of a singer but you imagine he deserves better material as an actor. Alexander Aguilar is by far the best dancer, nicely demonstrated in the song "Lay Low," the closest director and choreographer Dan Knechtges comes to mixing street moves, basketball and traditional Broadway dancing into an interesting mix.

In fairness, poor tunes are hard to build interesting dances around and after two viewings it's still hard to remember any of the musical numbers. They're performed very quietly and without any sense of rocking out by the house band, which may be keeping the volume down so as not to drown out the modest voices of the cast. The book is essentially the same as the production that leaped from *The Gym at Judson* to Broadway, with I think a few modest additions like a joke about the iPhone service Siri and a Newt Gingrich reference.

About the only interesting element of the show's earlier incarnation was that it was performed in an actual gym. Switching to Broadway hasn't been a problem for set designer Allen Moyer but a row of lockers and some hoops don't exactly wow with their creativity. He and lighting designer Michael Gottlieb have added a bank of bright lights at the back of the stage (a la *Dreamgirls*) that is seen at the beginning, partially revealed at the end of Act One and fully revealed for the finale. It adds a little pizzazz but clashes horribly with the gym setting and the overall effect is pedestrian. The costumes by David C. Woolard and Thomas Charles LeGalley are fine for the students though again not as regal or sexy as Mikel deserves. On a side note, the ball control of the cast is vastly improved. Before, it seemed unlikely any of them had ever even watched a basketball game, much less played one. Across the board, they're much improved and the audience doesn't need to spend its time worrying about whether they can hold onto the ball.

It's a pity this show rushed to Broadway though, to be fair, they were misled by summertime reviews that seized on the play as a pleasant diversion and vastly oversold its appeal. A second mounting on a smaller scale would have given cooler heads a chance to prevail. But the economics of theater in New York City at the moment mean the risk to reward of Off Broadway just doesn't compute. That's not to say *Lysistrata Jones* would work better in a smaller house. It didn't work in the tiny space below Washington Square Park and it doesn't work here. It simply should have been mounted (and genuinely worked on, rather than merely coasting on what they had) so everyone involved could realize there wasn't much there before the stakes and cost rose so high. It's always good to try your best, but sometimes you have to recognize when the game is over and that putting in more effort won't change the final score.

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**Note:** Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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