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Theater: *Newsies* Gets "Most Improved" Award on Broadway

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NEWSIES ** 1/2 out of ****
NEDERLANDER THEATRE

The Disney musical *Newsies* has moved from the Papermill Playhouse in New Jersey to Broadway with style. In every way, the show has been focused and improved both in the staging, the dancing, the songs and the performances. It's an instant smash that has sold out every performance (you can bet they'll extend the show again beyond its limited run through August) and is sure

to battle *Once* for the Best Musical Tony. It's still not a great show but it's amiable, family friendly fare and, given the immediate acclaim for its Papermill run, they are to be commended for doing the work to make this show better. (You can check out my original review here.)

The story is simple: Jack Kelly (a star-making turn by Jeremy Jordan) is the best newsie around at selling papers. When Joseph Pulitzer decides to squeeze out more profits by raising his prices for the lads who actually sell his paper, Jack is prodded into action and leads the boys on a strike. It soon spreads to all five boroughs and becomes a "children's crusade" that highlights all the kids who should be in school or having fun but instead slave away under terrible conditions. Jack has right on his side... as well as a pretty and eager new reporter Katherine (a winning Kara Lindsay) who -- would you believe it? -- might just be falling for the handsome Jack.

Dubbed "*Annie* with boys," this is essentially a dance show with a chomping at the bit cast of young actors dashing and dancing across the stage in one big number after another. If you wonder whether the kids will prevail, you've never seen a Disney film. Ben Fankhauser and Andrew Keenan-Bolger are the standouts in the biggest and best supporting roles, but these Dead End dancers impress up and down the line. They're also more ethnically diverse, which feels right for turn of the century New York. This ain't Shakespeare and they're having fun.

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The out of the way Nederlander on 41st Street is a good fit for *Newsies*, just like it was for the long-running *Rent*. An underdog show like this fits right in with this smaller Broadway house. That intimacy makes the show feel more personal and fun than the grand space of the Papermill, which is bigger than most Broadway spaces. With months of rehearsal and performance under their belt, the dancing is far tighter and focused now, showing off the energetic choreography of Christopher Gattelli to good effect. When *Annie* arrives in the fall, Broadway will be employing more young actors than a dozen seasons of *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Who knows what stars will emerge?

Some have suggested Disney planned to move the show to Broadway all along. (Do they do anything on a small scale? Not usually.) Still, it seems likely they expected the show to just tour and create a valuable property for high schools and regional companies down the road. Otherwise, surely they would have locked in star Jeremy Jordan and kept him on ice in case the "secret" plan to hit Broadway came to fruition. Instead, he had *Newsies* in New Jersey and then jumped right into Broadway's *Bonnie & Clyde*. It's to his and Disney's good luck that show closed quickly enough for Jordan to jump right back into *Newsies*, making him one of the rare actors (if not *only* actors) to create two original parts in new musicals in the same Broadway season. Jordan looks like a charismatic Broadway star of the future, assuming movies and TV don't snap him up for a while. He has excellent chemistry with Lindsay, who remains a better actor than singer. Their back and forth is the most mature and fully realized element of the show. A much-needed second act duet -- "Something to Believe In" -- is one of the show's best additions.

Other changes include a song for the villain of the piece, Pulitzer, and a new song for Jack's friend and theater owner Medda ("That's Rich"). Helen Anker was one of the best performers in the original production but it left audiences confused as to her exact relationship with Jack, muddying the waters of his budding romance. Recasting it with the big and brassy Capathia Jenkins and giving her a light-hearted song about money was a wise move. Frankly, Jack would still be lucky to have learned a few extra lessons from Medda, but it's clear now she's a mother figure for the lad.

None of the three new numbers match the originals from the movie, like "Santa Fe." But they do keep the second act from seeming like one long reprise of numbers from the first act, the way the show did in its original incarnation. Harvey Fierstein doubtless tightened the book in numerous small ways. And director Jeff Calhoun keeps the show moving smoothly and with a better focus.

This show always seemed a likely favorite for the road producers to tout as a potential winner of Best Musical. It's a family friendly name brand show. Now *Newsies* is also better.

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

Follow Michael Giltz on Twitter: www.twitter.com/michaelgiltz

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