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'The Muppets' GUESS WHO



Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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NEWSIES ** out of **** PAPERMILL PLAYHOUSE

Christian Bale has been one of our most talented actors since his brilliant breakthrough in Steven Spielberg's *Empire Of The Sun*. But he has a curious track record with movie musicals. In 1993, he starred in *Swing Kids*, a flop Disney movie about young kids in Germany who were crazy about big band and swing music just as the Nazis sweep aside their dreams of freedom and the West. It's not quite a musical, but it feels like one. And a year earlier Bale starred in *Newsies*, a movie with just a few modest numbers. It told the scrappy true story of the street kids who sold newspapers for pennies and

went on strike against the powerful Pulitzer syndicate. Both films were box office flops but developed ardent followings on home video, DVD and cable TV. Now *Newsies* has become a full-blown stage musical at the Papermill Playhouse in New Jersey. If it works commercially, it's certain that *Swing Kids* won't be far behind.

The story is family friendly in the Disney fashion. Jack Kelly (Jeremy Jordan) is the best newspaper seller around and the natural leader of the hungry waifs who scrape out an existence hawking the latest news. Jack also has a natural gift for drawing -- he paints the sets for the friendly actress and impresario Medda Larkin (Helen Anker). That's where he spots eager girl reporter Katherine Plumber (Kara Lindsey), who longs to break out of the society pages and write about something important.

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Her chance arises when mogul Joseph Pulitzer decides to squeeze more money for his empire by raising the price they charge the newsies for their copies, almost ensuring they'll be lucky to break even at best but giving him more cash in his pocket. Who cares about some street urchins? Jack is tempted to abandon his pals and follow the dream of a better life out West. But he rallies the lads, Katherine writes the front page story and soon the entire city knows about the horrible working conditions for kids all over the city and the newsies that have taken on the powerful Pulitzer.

It's as squeaky clean and wholesome as you'd expect from a show drawn from a Disney film. The boys are living rough on the streets, but their clothes are so neat and the lads so fresh-faced (despite a smudge here and there) they look ready for church on Sunday. The talk is of unionizing, but impressionable youth in the audience are more likely to be drawn to musical theatre than fighting for workplace rights. (On the other hand, take kids to this and *Billy Elliot* and *Les Miserables* and they might just get radicalized after all.)

Jeremy Jordan is our hero Jack. (He's also due to star on Broadway soon in the musical *Bonnie & Clyde*.) He and Lindsey handle their paper-thin roles with ease, not a simple task when the story is filled in with such broad strokes. Jordan has a solid voice that gets stronger the more he emotes. Lindsey on the other hand has a tendency to a harsh or strident tone when belting it out. But they're both personable and the biggest reason the show goes by painlessly. Anker - the actress with a heart of gold -- makes the most out of her comic number "Don't Come A-Knockin'," though costume designer Jess Goldstein is at fault for hewing too closely to Disney's sexless vibe. Medda's stage costume should be sexy and fun, not frumpy and saggy, especially when the actress playing her is a knockout.

Overall, this production is impressively full scale and ready for Broadway on a technical level. But the show itself still needs a lot of work. It feels both thin and over-stuffed. One big reason are the songs: it feels like there are more reprises than actual numbers. The four from the movie are fine but unfortunately they are not matched or outshone by any of the new ones.

Ultimately, we end up with more questions than answers. Maybe I missed a passing reference, but why does Jack romanticize Santa Fe? Did he read about it? See it in a movie? Meet a guy who was headed there? It's his dream so it would be nice to know where it came from. And what's his relationship with Medda? She's clearly a mother figure, but we have no idea in what way. Did she hide him from the cops or give him food when he was hungry? None of the other newsies move beyond a type -- the toughs, the cripple, the kids from good homes (they've got TWO parents) suddenly having to support their family. How about a song where the kids sell newspapers and deliver the headlines of the day? Or another where some of them take center stage.

If Joseph Pulitzer is going to be the villain of the piece, he should do something truly villainous or at least become more complicated and interesting than the paper tiger he remains here. Show Jack's growth as a thinker and Davey's growth as a fighter more clearly. Davey -- played nicely by Ben Fankhauser -- is the kid from a stable home and the intellectual of the bunch. The songs need more work, along with the choreography by Christopher Gattelli. Act Two has a rousing opener with "King Of New York." But it's hard to tell if the eager cast of performers is simply not razor tight or whether Gattelli is going for a loose, unprecise vibe. In any case, something is off because too often the performers seem ever so slightly out of sync.



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That goes for the direction as well. The staging of director Jeff Calhoun just feels messy, with people moving around each other like commuters on a crowded street and sets moving in and out and the general tone not one of a bustling city but rather...bumbling. Harvey Fierstein has focused the movie's script admirably and gets off one memorable zinger about Pulitzer and crooks. More of that spark would be welcome. The show will never be gritty or "real," but there's a lot to mine here, from Katherine trying to make it in a man's business to Medda being the mother figure Jack needs but no real substitute for constant love. And all those newsies: the large cast is eager and talented and working their butts off. (Though it's unfortunate the poster shows one black newsie while the show has none.) They believe in the material. Now they just need material that believes in them enough to tell a richer, more complicated story.

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

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