

# Theater: Rocky The Musical Doesn't Go the Distance

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**ROCKY** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**WINTER GARDEN THEATRE**

If ever a show cried out to be staged in the round, it's Rocky. The boxing ring dominates the Italian Stallion's life and the boxing ring should have dominated the musical's production design. Of course, on Broadway that would have meant the tiny Circle In The Square while producers opted for one of the biggest houses in town. Not smart. A show about boxing done in the round might have captured some excitement and intensity. It certainly would have called for inventive staging. And it definitely could avoid the momentum-killing spectacle of stopping the show right before the climax to reseat audience members on the stage, slide out a boxing ring, lower an electronic billboard and otherwise bring everything to a halt.

That creative missed opportunity aside, the idea of Rocky as a musical raised eyebrows from the start. But why? Sammy Davis Jr. had one of the best roles of his career in the boxing tuner Golden Boy. And, really, any subject can be turned into a musical. Still, in the case of this particular movie, however, the eyebrows were right. Sylvester Stallone's Oscar-winning drama is a quiet character study (and a good movie), far closer to the butcher-in-love romantic spirit of fellow Oscar winner Marty than the cartoon-ish sequels it begat. Rocky II? Rocky III? The Soviet-baiting Rocky IV? Now those are big, loud, brassy musicals waiting to happen. Satirical, humorous and probably Off Broadway musicals, to be honest. Still, they could sing!

But enough about the creative choices they might have made or the movie they should have musicalized in its place. Here is Rocky, a show that pumps up Bill Conti's theme from the movie at the beginning and end of the evening, not to mention shoe-horning Survivor's "Eye Of The Tiger" into a training montage (even though it's from Rocky III!). Rocky has multi-media aspects, boxers coming in from the back of the theater, TV cameras flashing the action as it happens onto video screens and a general three-ring circus atmosphere.

And all that noise and nonsense detracts from what everyone involved knows is the heart of Rocky: the shy, quiet romance; the tongue-tied palooka; the sense of place; the air of desperation and the belief that a guy could lose and still win. The sensitive, real moments are what made the movie a hit. The sensitive, real moments of the show are few and far between.

You know the story. Rocky (Andy Karl) is a 29-year-old boxer who makes a few bucks as a reluctant enforcer for a local loan shark in Philly. He's got nothing going on. Even the shy, mousy Adrian (Margo Seibert) -- the sister of his friend Paulie -- won't go out with him. But the defending champ Apollo Creed is coming to town for a highly publicized bout and his opponent has just been injured. They need a replacement -- fast -- and the unknown Rocky is suddenly shoved into the spotlight with the chance of a lifetime: he's guaranteed a huge purse and, who knows, maybe he'll get in a few good licks before the champ grinds him into the ground. I mean, Rocky's gonna lose, of course; everyone knows that.

Most of the texture and telling details of the film are missing here. Sure, they show the scene where Rocky drinks egg yolks and they rather perfunctorily display the stairs leading up to the Philadelphia Museum of Art just so he can jog his way to the top in triumph. But the people in the film, the characters that were vivid and real,

barely register here.

Adrian's brother Paulie (Danny Mastrogiorgio) seems like a harmless schmuck and frankly he's the only reason Rocky and Adrian go out on their first date. But after one thoughtless remark, he's drunk and demanding Adrian come home. Before you know it, she's singing a defiant "I'm Done" and cataloguing Paulie's ills as if he were an emotionally cruel monster. Huh? To confuse matters even further, practically in the next scene, Rocky is inviting Paulie to be in his corner during the big bout.

Crusty old manager Mickey (the pro Dakin Matthews) feels more like a hanger-on than a friend with Rocky's best interests at heart. Apollo Creed (Terence Archie) -- despite a bevy of beauties on his arms and a soul brother persona -- barely registers as a character, much less a foil for Rocky. Paulie's girlfriend, her pals and most everyone else is even more anonymous. The sense of Philly and the working class milieu that both held Rocky down and then lifted him up in pride? Nowhere in sight.

But at least we've got Rocky and Adrian. His banter with Adrian is easy and harmless. Their fumbling desire to connect comes across when Rocky first visits her at the pet store where she works. He makes a joke and -- with her back to him -- Adrian smiles and we smile too. There's even a little heat when they first kiss. (Why not? She looks great in a red dress and he looks great with his shirt off.)

But then they sing. The songs by the team of Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty seem as self-conscious as the two shy lovers. In keeping with the film's sensibility, they've striven for a casual, low-key vibe. The problem is that melodies have been tamped down as firmly as any "Broadway" belting. Apollo has a would-be soul number called "Patriotic" (with the inevitable "Can you dig it?" lyric). But otherwise it's one downbeat, unmemorable, plain-spoken tune after another. Act One perks up just a tad with a more traditional song for Rocky called "Fight From The Heart" and the closer "One Of Us." Still, he's staged to appear as much like a regular joe as possible for fear of looking like, you know, he's in a musical. Even when Rocky's belting out a number, they want you to remember he can take a belt as much as sing one.

Act Two is worse, with training montages that mimic similar scenes in the movies, as if we needed to see a cinematic reenactment of a training montage, rather than a theatrical one. (I think Rocky IV was 40% montages, 40% flashbacks to footage from earlier films and maybe 20% new material, but I digress). Tellingly, we learn literally nothing about actual training or fighting or strategy. "Eye Of The Tiger" is catchy of course, but it's strange to hand off lines to Apollo. He has so little to do, I'm not surprised they made that mistake. Still giving him a part of the tune ruins the song's emphatic, "I'm the man!" swagger. It should have been Rocky's moment of proud determination; instead Apollo gets another chance to stare him down.

Peter Hylenski's sound design doesn't help -- I'm speaking here of the miking of the orchestra and the mix. The music throughout felt a tad muffled. I thought at first this was because maybe the actors didn't have the power to cut through a full orchestra, but by the end it seems clear that wasn't the issue. Even "Eye Of The Tiger" and "Gonna Fly Now" (the instrumental theme song that went to #1 on the Billboard charts and is a guaranteed heart-pumper) don't have the sonic punch they should. The happy exceptions are Adrian's emotionally out of place but at least lively "I'm Done" and Mickey's "In The Ring." Sung when Mickey is pleading to be Rocky's manager, it's a solo spot for Matthews that has a solid melody, decent lyrics about the good old days of boxing and instrumentation to echo a by-gone era. These two songs aren't great, by any stretch, but they stick out defiantly in a show that otherwise has one bland piece after another.

They got Rocky's hat right, but the rest of the costumes by David Zinn are either undistinguished or just tackily obvious. His gym is as anonymous as the guys who are in it and for all the landmarks on display, they might just as easily be living in Boston or Phoenix as Philly. Rocky's disheveled apartment is nicely cluttered. But it's the only notable success of scenic designer Christopher Barreca who otherwise has filled the stage with clutter of an altogether different nature. Instead of Philly, we get slabs of metal, and then a train wreck at the finale.

For the big bout, the theater and front rows are filled with a boxing ring, a giant electronic billboard like you'd see at Madison Square Garden, risers on the stage for the people who've been moved from their section in the orchestra seating, sportscasters dropping down from the roof in a studio booth suspended in mid-air to blather on about the upcoming fight (to distract us from the fact that nothing is happening while we watch a set change), Adrian shoved up into one corner, fight promoters, babes in skimpy outfits who parade around telling us the round (they even walk through the middle of the fight, god knows why), managers, trainers, referees, audience members on the side encouraged to stand up (they do, otherwise they probably wouldn't see a thing), camera crews and guys with boom mikes to capture the dialogue in the ring and display it on the video monitors and if you're wondering how they shoved all those people onto the stage and made sense out of it, don't worry. They didn't. So many people are milling around that the actual fight -- often done in slow motion -- seems an afterthought.

Director Alex Timbers has come a cropper here, turning a distinctive, low-key movie into an anonymous, noisy, desperate to distract musical with no heart. The final boxing match is so confusingly handled -- any chance of excitement is dimmed by the ludicrous way in which it is staged -- that only a fanatic who can argue for the merits of Rocky V would be moved.

Karl has an appealing presence as Rocky and Seibert brings some life to the timid Adrian. Matthews does what he can with the manager Mickey but everyone else is so thinly drawn or forgettable that the actors are surely not to blame. A critic is not a pollster, but the evening audience I saw this with most assuredly did not feel roused. They tittered happily over a few key moments (like when Rocky drinks his egg yolks). The sides of beef descending from the ceiling for that meat locker scene got some polite applause. But mostly, they sat there and patiently waited for the fight which, in the end, seemed a lot of bother for very little.

To be clear, Rocky isn't a disaster or a train-wreck, not really. It's just...boring.

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