

Theater: Show Boat Sings (Thankfully)

Theater: Show Boat Sings (Thankfully)

SHOW BOAT *** out of ****

AVERY FISHER HALL AT LINCOLN CENTER

Show Boat is an excellent show for the New York Philharmonic to present in concert. It's almost absurdly overstuffed with performers, making a Broadway revival dangerously expensive to mount. (Though it was done brilliantly and profitably in 1994 by director Hal Prince.) And it's a landmark show. As the first serious musical, it paved the way for everything that came since. No Show Boat; then no Oklahoma. That's not how artistry works, but you get my point. It's big, it's lavish, it has a cast of thousands and hearing the New York Philharmonic in full glory bursting through this score is a delight.

Thank goodness, because a concert presentation of Show Boat is the least favorable to this work and the cast was notably spotty in their dramatics. It's beautifully sung throughout but this Show Boat was rather leaky when it came to remembering lines and crafting vivid characters.

Based on the novel, it's melodrama writ large. Characters fall in love instantly and reunite after years of separation with nary a word of dialogue to address the emotional fallout. Traditionally, the real star is the passage of time. The forty years that pass, the changes in show biz as reflecting the changes in America and so on -- that's as vital a character as any. Without scenery and props and all the tools of the trade to illustrate this, the weight of the drama falls squarely on the rickety soap opera that unfolds in front of that panorama. Luckily, they're usually bursting into song.

Cap'n Andy (Fred Willard) is the genial leader of a traveling troupe of entertainers who live and love on his show boat the Cotton Blossom. Nagged and nipped at by the more sensible Parthy Ann (Jane Alexander), he's always romanticizing their adventures or slipping a down-on-their-luck performer a ten spot. Parthy Ann is determined their daughter Magnolia (Lauren Worsham) will have as little to do with show folk as possible, a lost cause since they do all live together in tight quarters on a boat. Magnolia loves as a big sister the boat's star attraction Julie (Vanessa Williams, looking glorious in red) and Julie loves her leading man and husband Steve (Edward Watts).

Both Julie and the cook Queenie (NaTasha Yvette Williams) smile as Magnolia declares she's fallen in love with the riverboat gambler Gaylord Ravenal (Julian Ovenden). This sense of family amongst the races tossed together on the Cotton Blossom is the strong subtext of the show. Indeed, the world of the show boat is the only place where whites and blacks mingle freely in the show, sharing songs and an intimacy that is not merely frowned upon on land but downright dangerous. Still, even here the book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II (with music by Jerome Kern) are far from idealized.

The tale goes into over-drive when Julie spurns the unwanted attentions of Pete (a scenery chewing Brian Cali in the show's first sign it won't be a subtle one in the acting department). Just as Magnolia needs her most, Julie is revealed to be of mixed-race and in the show's most dramatic and still powerful gesture, her white husband Steve manages to protect Julie, though at the cost of their jobs. Decades pass, partners fall in and out of love and the show boat floats on as changing times turn this pinnacle of class into a quaint relic of the past.

It's bizarre to think some still accuse Show Boat of racism when the show -- whatever its flaws -- clearly denounces racism at every turn. It begins by giving voice to the black workers describing their onerous conditions and condemning the whites who profit from it. That's as far from happy "darkies" as one can get and

the talented chorus delivers it firmly. While a "tragic" mulatto in the story is of course doomed to despair, that shouldn't erase the fact that her love for Steve allows everyone on board a chance to help them and tacitly denounce prejudice. Yes, they're sent packing -- the show is too realistic to do anything else. It's a pity Julie's story all but ends there, but it still packs a punch today, much less back when it debuted in 1927. Joe (Norm Lewis) and Queenie have a joking relationship that toys with stereotypes but as so often has happened in the past they are elevated by talented actors who give these characters specificity and life. Lewis and NaTasha Yvette Williams are so good you might assume the show is about them.

It's not easy to tackle such an elaborate work for a mere handful of performances. But that's no excuse for the many, many stumblings over dialogue that afflicted quite a few actors. The simple plot may be hokey, but it can be delivered with earnest pleasure. Luckily, whenever the moment creaked, conductor and director Ted Sperling was ready to launch the New York Philharmonic into another classic song. The orchestra sounded vibrant and wonderful; add in a cast of more than 40 singers and you've got a glorious sound. Sperling looked positively gleeful as he roared the complex and soaring melodies of Kern. If at times the dynamics seemed a tad off (the orchestra swamped the chorus and one or two vocals at times), one couldn't complain too much about hearing it at full blast.

You could write a book about all the songs included and cut from various iterations of this show over the past 90 years. Happily, both "Mis'ry's Comin' Round" (a showcase for Queenie) and "Ah Still Suits Me" (a duet between Queenie and Joe) are here, making full use of the talented NaTasha Yvette Williams and Norm Lewis. He of course also tackles "O! Man River" to great effect. It's given a subtly quicker pace so the song doesn't drag along as a Classic Number but is presented in a more realistic, relatively low-key manner. It still breaks into full glory and is reprised with a big chorus to big effect. Here "O! Man River" is a song that's fully integrated into the show thanks to Lewis and the conducting of Sperling, rather than taking on a too noble aura. It's a show tune, not holy writ and Lewis does it full justice.

The comedy team Frank (Christopher Fitzgerald) and Ellie (Allie Mauzey) are winning at first, though less funny each time they return until their big comic number in the second act "Goodbye, My Lady Love" is the rare number to fall flat. Still, they're well matched in personality and voice. But other than Queenie and Joe, the rest of the romantic couples are mismatched.

Watts has little to do as the white husband of the passing mulatto Julie and does just that. Vanessa Williams in contrast is splendid. She delivers a wonderful "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" that nimbly straddles the line between the musical world of the black workers and the white pop she delivers nightly to an audience. It also works wonderfully on its own as a charming rendition. Williams is even better as a world weary entertainer in Act Two when she "rehearses" a new ballad "Bill," managing to stay truthful to the scene (a veteran practicing a song in the afternoon for her boss) while mining the song for its beauty and power. You see the performer Julie and where she's been in the intervening years (time has always been passing in this decades-spanning show), you see her talent, and you see the heartache that's at the center of the song. She's so good the absence of Julie from the story after Act One is all the more painful.

Dramatically, Magnolia and Gaylord are a poor pair as well. Lauren Worsham perhaps didn't have the time to nail down her part, with the child of Act One feeling rather artificial. Her costume by Tracy Christensen doesn't help since Worsham is emphasizing the little kid while the costume shows her off as a young woman, to creepy effect. Worsham of course won a Tony nomination for her delightful turn in *A Gentleman's Guide To Love and Murder* and can do better. As with that show, her operatic voice is perfectly suited to the material given Magnolia.

Happily, she's partnered with the dangerously handsome Julian Ovenden. He'll always be Andrew Foyle of *Foyle's War* to me but hopefully his arc on *Downton Abbey* will expand the opportunities for this effortlessly charming actor. He's got a marvelously old-fashioned voice and an old school way of delivering the goods. Any

shows looking to revive a classic work of Broadway should be lining up to get his services immediately. Ovenden delivered on the acting and together their voices paired beautifully. If anyone wants to tell the Nelson Eddy-Jeanette McDonald story, here are their stars.

And why hasn't someone built a show around dancer Kendrick Jones yet? A stand-out in *The Scottsboro Boys*, he has remarkable stage presence with the elegance of Fred Astaire and the modern chops of Savion Glover, to whom Jones is a natural heir. Any other tapper on Broadway must curse him because Jones is so good you know any show that needs tap dancing doesn't hold auditions: they just ask if Jones is available.

So yes, this concert performance of *Show Boat* made clear how much this war horse of a musical needs the spectacle of sets and costumes to put over its era-spanning trajectory and distract from the paper-thin melodrama at its heart. And seeing 40 or so people on stage backed by a full orchestra makes it obvious why a show stuffed with great songs has only rarely been revived on Broadway. It may have been iffy on the acting, but the marvelous voices throughout led by Vanessa Williams and Norm Lewis, a star-in-the-making turn by Julian Ovenden and the magnificent work of the New York Philharmonic presented the cavalcade of classic songs in fine splendor.

THEATER OF 2014

[Beautiful: The Carole King Musical](#) ***

[Rodney King](#) ***

[Hard Times](#) ** 1/2

[Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead](#) **

[I Could Say More](#) *

[The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner](#) **

[Machinal](#) ***

[Outside Mullingar](#) ***

[A Man's A Man](#) * 1/2

[The Tribute Artist](#) ** 1/2

[Transport](#) **

[Prince Igor at the Met](#) **

[The Bridges Of Madison County](#) ** 1/2

[Kung Fu \(at Signature\)](#) **

[Stage Kiss](#) ***

[Satchmo At The Waldorf](#) ***

[Antony and Cleopatra](#) at the Public **

[All The Way](#) ** 1/2

[The Open House \(Will Eno at Signature\)](#) ** 1/2

[Wozzeck \(at Met w Deborah Voigt and Thomas Hampson and Simon O'Neill\)](#)

[Hand To God](#) ***

[Tales From Red Vienna](#) **

[Appropriate \(at Signature\)](#) *

[Rocky](#) * 1/2

[Aladdin](#) ***

[Mothers And Sons](#) **

[Les Miserables](#) *** 1/2

[Breathing Time](#) * 1/2

[Cirque Du Soleil's Amaluna](#) * 1/2

[Heathers The Musical](#) * 1/2

[Red Velvet, at St. Ann's Warehouse](#) ***