

# Theater: Stephen Foster Lives! Rosencrantz Is Dead!

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**HARD TIMES** \*\* 1/2

**ROSENCRANTZ AND GULDENSTERN ARE DEAD** \*\*

**I COULD SAY MORE** \*

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**THE CELL**

No one will ever rescue composer Stephen Foster from obscurity. Often called the father of American music, Foster's songs have been enduring favorites for more than 150 years. His particular strain of Americana has been kept alive by the likes of Nelson Eddy to Van Dyke Parks and Randy Newman right up to acts like Mumford & Sons today. Foster's catalog of more than 200 tunes have been recorded by everyone from opera singers to bluegrass artists to alternative rock acts. (A tribute album to Foster won a Grammy in 2005.)

Nonetheless, the major strength of the new musical *Hard Times* by Larry Kirwan of Black 47 is indeed to remind anyone not paying attention just how vital a great song remains. These aren't old chestnuts; they're standards. The excuse for this show is the vicious race riots of 1863 in New York City. In the midst of the Civi War, Lincoln (desperate for more troops) called for a general draft. Whites and especially the Irish in the city were enraged by a draft they knew would never include the sons of the wealthy and uninterested in helping free the slaves they imagined would compete for their jobs. Mobs went on a rampage, killing at least 11 black men and burning down countless churches and schools and other buildings.

Martial law would have been declared but since the military lacked the forces to enforce it, they simply didn't bother. The Five Points, an area where blacks and whites lived side by side and "assimilationists" (people who married or lived with those of another race) were tacitly accepted, was hardest hit.

At the same time, the real-life Foster was scraping by in the area, abandoned by his wife and child, penniless and desperately churning out more music in an attempt to stay afloat. He failed, dying six months after the riots had inspired a burst of final creativity. Kirwan's play imagines Foster is gay (hence the separation from his wife) and places him in a bar run by a strong-willed black woman who is the widow of one Irish man, courted by a white bigot who despises the Irish and works hard to keep her business a place open to all.

This makes *Hard Times* feel action-packed when in fact the opposite is true. The rioting takes place off stage and the drinking establishment feels like an oasis of calm where the turmoil outside rarely intrudes. Foster (Jed Peterson) and Owen (John Charles McLaughlin), a younger Irish man he slept with, warily circle each other. Nelly (Almeria Campbell) keeps the hot-headed customers in check, namely the bigot Michael Jenkins (James D. Sasser) and the quietly righteous black performer Thomas Jefferson (Stephane Duret).

In truth, the plot is paper thin -- what could Nelly possibly see in Jenkins, a man who can barely go five minutes without insulting something she holds dear? Still, it serves well enough to set up the performances. There's a hint that the blacks and the Irish will find common ground in the future just as Owen and Thomas grudgingly admire each other's dancing. Hope for the closeted Foster, of course, is far away and too dim for him to even imagine. His only hope lies in writing, something Foster does throughout the show.

It begins with a mocking blackface rendition of "Camptown Races" to make clear Foster's roots were in minstrel shows, a period he longs to put behind him. A number of songs -- "Hard Times Come Again No More," "Five Points" and the dance piece "Lero, Lero" -- are presented in as big a manner as the tiny, intimate space of The Cell permits. (The choreography by Joe Barros is understandably minimal.)

But the most effective moments by far are the quiet ones: McLaughlin's "Gentle Annie," Peterson singing "Jeanie With The Light Brown Hair" to his wife in a flashback as well as the unaccompanied act two opener "Oh Susanna," and Duret's reclaiming of "Old Folks At Home" from its stereotyped leanings. In general, the cast has voices that are modest, but it works in favor of the show. It reminds you of how music was an ever-present source of entertainment performed by one and all, not just listened to passively on the radio.

Full credit to Kirwan's additional music, the musical direction and arrangements and orchestrations contributed by Rona Siddiqui and the on-stage band that plays the songs of Foster with verve. They strike the right balance between modern punch and period style that gives a sense of how the songs might have sounded in their day. Destitute and alone when he died, surely even a beautiful dreamer like Foster would be amazed and thrilled to see his best songs so instantly recognizable and powerful for audiences today.

## **ROSENCRANTZ AND GULDENSTERN ARE DEAD \*\*** **THE ACTING CO. AT PEARL THEATRE**

For some bizarre reason, Tom Stoppard's playful *Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead* hasn't had a serious New York revival in almost three decades. So it's long overdue for someone like the Acting Company to do this comic gem in repertory with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a pairing so obvious you smile at the thought.

Stoppard's conceit was to take two very minor characters from that dark classic and put them center stage. Buffeted by plot twists they only dimly recognize, the schoolboy chums of *Hamlet* find themselves sent hither and thither before being dispatched to their death, barely more aware of what's going on than they were at the beginning. This becomes an excuse for Stoppard's delicious wordplay, musings on destiny and the occasional pirate attack.

Unfortunately, this revival by John Rando (*Urinetown*) serves mainly to illustrate how devilishly difficult this -- and really, all -- Stoppard is to get right. It demands acting of the highest order to nail the mix of whimsy and deadly seriousness, the whipsaw changes from goofy to cerebral and back again.

Grant Fletcher Prewitt as *Rosencrantz* comes closer to the demands of the play; his partner in crime Ian Gould as *Guildenstern* less so. In general, this version somewhat captures the surface comedy but utterly misses the dark truths woven throughout. The tech elements are serviceable and certainly the actors climbing the mountain of *Hamlet* (such as John Skelley as the dour Dane and Angela Janas as Ophelia) are having fun larking around here. It must be a balm to get a break from one of Shakespeare's most gloom-laden works and just goof off. Unfortunately, the fun for the most part remains on the stage. We watch, occasionally we smile but we never feel caught up in the hilariously cruel predicament of two people who are tossed about by events beyond their control. Hopefully some day soon this neglected classic by one of our best playwrights will be tackled more successfully.

## **I COULD SAY MORE \*** **OTHER SIDE PRODUCTIONS AT GUILD THEATRE**

Have you ever considered getting a time share or renting out a place at the Pines with a group of friends? Sure, some people have ugly experiences but you and your pals get along great and nothing unpleasant would occur. It'll be fun! Watching *I Could Say More* will disabuse you of this fantasy.

Four couples and one son come together for a weekend at a rented beach house on Long Island in this work by writer-director-star Chuck Blasius. They're a variety pack of couples lacking only a lesbian pair to be complete:

you have the gay couple who've been together for 15 years but just tied the knot, the gay brother of one of the couple and his boy toy, a straight woman and her still-married boyfriend, and to cap it off a gay man married to a straight woman who is fighting off cancer via chemotherapy and a double mastectomy. The teenage son of that just-married gay couple is the only sane, polite person in the place.

Indeed, everyone is so immediately rude, insulting or at best indifferent to each other you long for the camaraderie of *The Boys In The Band*. *Vicious* doesn't begin to describe it and it's certainly not vicious in the revealing vein of *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* It's just banally mean and testy. Why anyone would stay for an hour much less all weekend is a puzzle. An interminable second act makes matters worse with the lights slowly dimming (and seeming to announce the end of the play) only to have them come back up again five or six times. Most every actor seems barely off book, stumbling over words or phrases at times.

Only Brandon Smalls as the son Jason offers an affable, likable presence. He is at the heart of two brief moments of clarity and modest drama: in one, Rakel (Monique Vukovic) tries to show Jason what it's like to lug around breasts. In the other, Joe (Robert Gomes) tells the kid the origin of his many tattoos. So let's not blame the actors. If a weekend at the beach goes poorly, one usually blames the host, here conveniently played by the writer-director Blasius. Just as his fridge is understocked (he hopes to cajole guests into going out and paying for dinner), his play *I Could Say More* is under-stuffed with clear characters, good dialogue or any motivation explaining why these people are friends in the first place.

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*I Could Say More* \*