

Theater: Trepid Nite 'On The Town;' Overwrought 'Belle'

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ON THE TOWN ** out of ****

THE BELLE OF AMHERST ** out of ****

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LYRIC THEATRE

How can you fail with On The Town? This bubbly, classic musical is filled with great musical numbers and a book by Comden and Green with music by Leonard Bernstein, comic characters that allow numerous actors to shine, lots of dancing and to top it off sailors in their navy whites on leave in New York City. It's the next best thing to being in New York during Fleet Week (when in fact, it feels like the entire town is merely the backdrop to an immersive performance of On The Town sans -- sadly -- dancing sailors).

And yet, the show has never been successfully revived since its debut at the tail end of World War II (followed by the rather different but wonderful film in 1949). According to [the indispensable Internet Broadway Database](#), [On The Town's](#) original run lasted just over one year. A revival in 1971 lasted barely two months. The George C. Wolfe revival in 1998 (which I was crazy about when I saw its incarnation as part of Shakespeare in the Park) barely made it to three months. So if this new edition lasts four months (it began in Pittsfield, Massachusetts and came to Broadway on the tailwind of a rave in the New York Times), it'll be the most successful revival yet! Given reportedly strong reviews across the board, that should happen.

But the year-long success of the original seems out of reach for a show that falls dramatically short in evoking New York City or creating any real magic beyond some talented actors doing their best in flat surroundings. Certainly no one -- not even Wolfe -- has recreated the era in which the story first took place, the wartime ambiance in which the knowledge that these kids on leave might never return should color the entire light-hearted proceedings and give this lark some emotional undercurrents.

Still, there's always "New York, New York."

Three pals are on shore leave in New York City before heading out, presumably to the Pacific. Gabey (the very likable Tony Yazbeck) becomes obsessed with meeting Ivy Smith (Megan Fairchild, principal dancer with New York City Ballet), aka Miss Turnstiles of June, a girl he sees on a poster in the subway.

His buddies Chip (Jay Armstrong Johnson, who was great in Wild Animals You Should Know) and Ozzie (Clyde Alves) put aside their obsessions -- sight-seeing and girls girls girls, respectively -- to make their friend's dream come true. They split up, have adventures and reunite in Times Square for a big night on the town until the inevitable last minute rush up the gangplank to their ship and future destiny as war hero veterans or the honored dead.

A huge, insurmountable problem becomes clear right at the start. The scenic and projection design of Beowulf Boritt is genuinely shoddy and unimaginative in the extreme. Boritt has done work I love (such as on The Scottsboro Boys, just debuting in the West End to deserved acclaim). But here the cavernous space of the Lyric feels...empty. Godawful projections meant to evoke the city streets as Chip and cab driver Hildy (Alysha

Umphress) careen about are without charm. If you didn't see the outline of the Empire State Building, you'd have no idea where they were. The cityscape looks like some bad '80s video game as indiscriminate blobs of buildings trudge by.

A scene evoking stores like Macy's and Saks is similarly generic, as is every look at brownstones, the bottom of the city where you can catch a ferry and spot the Statue Of Liberty (whose torch is presumably indicating which way the wind blows since it points in one direction rather banally) and on and on. The fantasy sequence where Gabey and Ivy dance amidst supposed luxury? It's indicated by some hanging tinsel and vague cardboard cutouts lowered from the ceiling you slowly realize are supposed to be chandeliers of some sort.

Though the costumes of Jess Goldstein hint at a cartoon evocation of the city, there's no sense this is an idealized or playful New York City of our dreams a la *Guys And Dolls*. It's a generic backdrop where Times Square, the Natural Museum of History (which is just weird looking -- why is one section closed off for repairs, you wonder?), Carnegie Hall's rehearsal space (looking like the set of a tired farce) and other iconic locations looking nothing like the real thing and certainly nothing like an imaginative spin on them. It unmoors the entire evening when the only time you feel like you're actually in New York City is after you leave.

Another flaw is Fairchild as Ivy. The demands on her are quite modest. She has to deliver a few lines and be a convincing object of desire. But in a flat, tepid Broadway debut Fairchild can barely deliver her dialogue convincingly and has none of the stage presence she evokes at the NYCB. As an actress, she's a very good dancer.

That puts the other gals front and center, where they happily reside. The show's few bright spots definitely reside with Umphress as Hildy and Elizabeth Stanley as the scientifically minded but man-crazy Claire De Loone. They're best when paired with their romantic love interests, such as Hildy's iconic "I Can Cook Too" and Claire's "Carried Away." The wonderful Jackie Hoffman -- looking like a dead ringer for Edna Mode from *The Incredibles* -- was pushing too hard here for the laughs as Ivy's cynical voice coach. When she was asked to walk into walls and stumble around looking for an exit, one felt for this talented performer.

Notably, no one hits a home run. And a great deal of the show feels like filler, from the beauty pageant that feels like a time killer in Act One to the endless, exhausting parade of identical nightclubs in Act Two. Similarly, the orchestra under music director and conductor James Moore sounds terrific. But opening the evening with the national anthem felt like pandering when the rest of the evening didn't even bother to remind us a war was on. And their Act Two opening with another overture felt like more padding.

The choreography of Joshua Bergasse was workmanlike, but rarely more. I've no idea whether the act two dance number/dream ballet sequence is lifted or inspired by Jerome Robbins or completely original. But in this context, it felt divorced from the characters and what was going on dramatically (why exactly would Gabey and Ivy be boxing? They barely know each other). For me it had no emotional impact.

That said, the energetic chorus of dancers (often doubling and tripling in various roles) was the strongest element of the entire show. Here at least director John Rando was focused and imaginative, giving them bits of business and specific characters to play while dancing or singing or simply sitting and watching a show in a cabaret as background; they did their work flawlessly.

I've barely mentioned Yazbeck, which is a shame since this should have been the show to put him in a new league. He's affable and sweet, though without a girl we care about, his would-be romance has no pull. He and Johnson and Alves are all fine, really, though the show's idea of sex-hungry sailors begins and ends with the pelvic thrust. Yazbeck does shine on his big ballads, especially "Lonely Town" in the middle of Act One. Rando places actors throughout the theater, wandering around in isolation and softly joining in as Yazbeck sings about the angst of being alone. I believe sound designer Kai Harada deftly drops out Yazbeck's mike at one point so he's singing with little or no amplification at a key moment, making him sound more vulnerable and alone than

ever. Happily, he has a booming, old-fashioned voice more than up to the task.

One other song hints at the heights this show can reach: the two pairs of lovers are riding on the subway to Gabey's rescue when they realize time is slipping away and the sailors will soon be going back on board and off to war. They sing the wistful ballad "Some Other Time" with real poignancy. It's a rare moment of emotion for a show with a generic set, what feels like lots of filler and a desperate desire to yuk it up before we've even begun to know the people at hand.

Having seen the joyous '98 revival, I know this show isn't dated or not up to its reputation. Of course not every night on the town can be memorable. But every production of On The Town should be; the songs, the story and the brilliant original production are too rich to accept anything less.

THE BELLE OF AMHERST ** out of **** **WESTSIDE THEATRE**

The plays of [William Luce](#) are resolutely out of fashion. He's been on Broadway four times but never very successfully in commercial terms. Often one-person shows about a famous figure (I would say "always" but Barrymore has two characters and another has some off-stage voices), they are dead cheap to stage, catnip for actors wanting to tackle an iconic figure while chewing the scenery and perennial favorites in regional theaters around the world, I presume.

Actor John Barrymore, writer Isak Dinesen, flapper Zelda Fitzgerald, playwright Lillian Hellman, author Charlotte Bronte, war hero Patton: Luce has done them all in one form or another. Most famously, he did poet Emily Dickinson in a one-woman show that the great Julie Harris won a Tony for and happily toured the country with for many years.

Now The Belle Of Amherst returns with Joely Richardson as the reputedly hermit-like but actually vivid poetess who is here to share a recipe or two, joke about her reputation with the locals and quote liberally from her poetry and letters to give a sense of the rich emotional life enjoyed by one of America's greatest poets. (Only Walt Whitman rivals Dickinson in influence. All others descend from them.)

I'd never seen Harris on stage or in the PBS taping of this show. I've never read a biography of Dickinson and only know her life in the most broad brushstroke terms. So Richardson might have done just about anything. As long as it was internally consistent and convincing, I would have been happy. Still, somehow I don't imagine Dickinson was like this.

Often seen as a virtual hermit, Dickinson has been revealed to have numerous passions and disappointments despite rarely wandering from her door. She had a deep apparently epistolary romance with a married man that came to nought, a lengthy exchange with the editor of The Atlantic Monthly that led to professional disappointment after he insisted her poems weren't truly worthy (he also dissed Whitman), a distant mother, a loving father, a co-dependent sister who freaked out at the possibility of Dickinson ever leaving and so on. Between all that and gossipy locals, life wasn't so dull for Dickinson.

But Richardson strives so mightily to inject emotion and passion and turmoil into the words of Dickinson, that the result seems hyper-dramatic and overwrought. I've admired Richardson onstage -- most recently in the Classic Stage Company's Ivanov. Here she seems unprepared and entirely at sea. The performance I saw included numerous stumbles over the text, beginning at the start and right up to the climactic recitation of Dickinson's famous "Because I could not stop for Death."

My temptation is to blame the play. Luce's stumbling over the life of Dickinson in this production felt rambling and incoherent. Fact follows fact with no rhyme or reason and it would seem a challenge to remember this rambling recitation of details. That editor of The Atlantic? His imminent arrival is the finale of act one and immediately dealt with in act two. The one, true love? He's barely introduced as her heart's real passion before

it's all over. Did Emily mention her father loves animals? No, she hadn't and why should we care? A distant mother? Discussed briefly and then it's resolved because as mother grew frail, Emily was able to establish some long-sought intimacy.

One-person shows about famous folk often devolve into "and then I did...." Perhaps a more focused tale that zeroed in on her crushing reception by the editor of The Atlantic would have created more drama for this story. Certainly Richardson is at her best as Dickinson realizes not only won't he publish her work but he doesn't think anyone else should either.

Too often, random moment follows random moment, with Richardson either making a hash of the poetry or injecting melodrama into a voice that -- in poetry -- surely is better evoked as wry and intelligent and coolly observant, whatever the demands of the stage.

The poet who wrote this is someone I'd love to meet:

"Faith is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see--
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency.

Sadly, she is not present in The Belle of Amherst.

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