



Michael Giltz, Contributor [BookFilter](#) creator

Theater: "The Honeymooners" Musical Won't Eclipse TV Classic

10/09/2017 03:04 am ET | **Updated** Oct 09, 2017

THE HONEYMOONERS ** out of ****

PAPERMILL PLAYHOUSE

On the classic sitcom *The Honeymooners*, bus driver Ralph Kramden dreams big. He's always fantasizing about getting a promotion or winning on a game show or launching a get-rich-quick scheme. But every episode usually ends right back where it started, with Ralph realizing how lucky he is to have what he's got, hugging his wife Alice and declaring, "Baby, you're the greatest!"

The new musical *The Honeymooners* also dreams big: huge dance numbers, goofy spoofs a la *The Producers* and *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying*, plot twists that upend the show's formula (they find success...and keep it!) and more. Surely the creatives assumed they would have to go big to make it to Broadway. The pity is that just like Ralph did time and time again, they failed to realize what they had when the show stays simple and real and sentimental.

It's more than a pity because *The Honeymooners* manages the minor miracle of finding four actors to inhabit these iconic roles and bring them ably to life. Without being broad or cartoonish or ever stooping to impersonation, they pretty much nail Ralph Kramden, Ed Norton, Alice and (to a lesser degree) Trixie. Michael Mastro sings great and ably captures the goofily sweet nature of Norton. Leslie Kritzer zeros in on Alice so deftly you almost do a double take. She's got that speaking voice, that deadpan stare that can raise laughs without raising an eyebrow and yet she's a real flesh and blood person, not riffing on the performance of Audrey Meadows. Michael McGrath is Ralph Kramden, not Jackie Gleason playing Ralph Kramden. In the show's subtlest move, they quietly dial down his shouting and mugging, his abusive rants directed towards Norton and his tirades against Alice for not believing in him, all without losing the heart of the character. They don't soften Ralph so much as make him more palatable for a two and a half hour musical.

On the TV show, Trixie was never as distinctive as the other three characters. But the book writers Dusty Kay & Bill Nuss did their homework. Drawing on on the original Trixie (as played by Elaine Stritch in all of one sketch!) they give her a background as a burlesque dancer, with Laura Bell Bundy fleshing her out nicely

(though her singing voice was not the best on the night I caught her).

Even in the cavernous Papermill Playhouse, these four pros land the modest zingers and comic ping-ponging of the classic sitcom style with ease. Sitting in a modest little apartment with just a few rickety chairs, they fill up the theater with warmth and charm. Imagine trying to find actors to embody the characters in *I Love Lucy* or *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* or any other classic TV series and you can appreciate what a feat this is for the show.

Unfortunately, a wayward book and a weak score (the music is by Stephen Weiner and the lyrics by Peter Mills) let them down. The bigger the show gets as it crams in unnecessary dance breaks and elaborate numbers, the farther it strays from what works. When the finale goes all meta on us, your heart sinks at how little they understood the appeal of the original series.

It begins, naturally, with a dream. Ralph is convinced he's going to get a promotion at the bus company. That falls through but Ralph can't be held down for long. He decides to rent a piano for an extravagant \$40 so he and Norton can enter an ad writing contest. All they have to do is write a jingle about cheese and they can win \$500. Who wouldn't spend \$40 when they KNEW it would get them \$500 back? It's a sure thing!

Shocking pretty much everyone, Ralph's plan works and then some. He and Norton win the contest. But they don't just get the \$500 prize, they also score plush jobs on Madison Avenue! Meanwhile, Trixie decides to audition for a fancy nightclub and gets the job! It's clear the manager hopes for something more than a peck on the cheek, but Trixie misses the spotlight and takes it anyway. Before you know it, Ralph is fantasizing about renting a posh apartment on Park Avenue, Trixie is feeling guilty about the attention of her new boss, Norton is being tempted by their deceitful superior who insist his melodies are the real deal (not Ralph's terrible lyrics) and Alice is standing by doing what she always does...getting ready to clean up Ralph's mess.

The problems are many. While the actors nail the straightforward dialogue scenes, the musical numbers rarely rise above the anonymous. Each act has nine songs and it isn't until the fifth song of the first act that something specific and fresh happens. It's not the song itself — "The Madison Avenue Line" blurs by as Ralph's co-workers wish him well on his new job at an ad agency — but the way Ralph keeps waiting to break into song but gets interrupted by the guys. It's a great way to embody his sad sack persona — Ralph doesn't get the solo even on a song celebrating his chance to be movin' on up. Even better, when Ralph leaves the scene they keep singing and admit they hope for the best but expect Ralph will blow this big break just like he's blown every other opportunity in his life.

It's a rare moment when someone other than the four leads feels like a real character. Unfortunately, too much of the song and dance on display feels like filler. "Infine la Felicit" is a drawn-out piece that segues from a mock Italian dance to a mock Irish dance, never amusingly. "Toast Of The Town" is a boring fantasy sequence that breaks the fourth wall in a bad way, a hint of things to come. It's also a poor ending to act one.

Happily, the musical numbers (choreographed by Joshua Bergasse) get a little better in act two, with three different songs offering pleasure of one sort or another. "Love Gone Down The Drain" is Norton's big solo number which Mastro sells very well. He's distraught after finding out Trixie was kissed by another man and naturally heads down to the sewers to sing a lament. It's a fast-paced tune that captures Norton's rush of pain very amusingly. But typical of the show, it goes on way too long. Norton is joined by a chorus of fellow sewer workers including a guy in a grungy Santa Claus outfit (I have no idea why, though the show is set right before Christmas). The Santa guy is distracting of course and they continue dancing and singing long after the song should have ended. Cut the song in half, cut the Santa, focus on Norton and you'd have an unqualified highlight.

"To The Moon" opens act two and while the song itself is only modestly successful as a tune, it neatly and beautifully overcomes the show's biggest stumbling block. In the original series, of course, Ralph is always threatening to pop Alice and send her straight to the moon. We know he'd never hurt a hair on her head but that's not enough today. Simply and directly, Alice interrupts him to say try it, what are you waiting for? And just as we start to get uncomfortable, Ralph stops singing and says simply, "I don't mean it," looking as abashed as a little boy. So why does he say it, she asks? And he admits that he's a blowhard with a big mouth. From a tirade, the song segues into a romance — sending Alice to the moon becomes a promise of a better life. It's the show's most heartfelt moment and they accomplish it with just two actors on stage. There's a lesson there.

And the actual show-stopper is Alice's solo "A Woman's Work." (Like so many touches, it's a purposeful echo — in this case the title of an episode — just as a golfing gag echoes a famous bit from another story from the Classic 39.) Alice has confronted Ralph's unethical superior from work and proceeds to head home. She

doesn't have Trixie's nightclub career to tout, but Alice establishes her worth here in a no-nonsense manner. Kritzer sings about all a woman does, again echoing the TV show where Alice famously pointed out, "Man works from sun to sun, but woman's work is never done."

Kritzer has an easy laugh line where she says women work so hard it's enough to make you wish a woman would become President of the United States. But she gets more and more serious as the song continues, then playfully duets with the orchestra (even peeking down at the musicians) and as they hit a jazzy riff she starts scatting. The song builds and builds, Kritzer goes on another extended bit of scatting and then hits a crazy high note at the end that has the audience exploding. This comes three quarters of the way through the show and is by far the highlight, but it's due mostly to her performance, not anything in the melody or lyrics. She sells the hell out of it, even though there's not much to sell. (As with any new musical, these are just first impressions of songs you hear only once. Sometimes songs and a score in general improve with repeated listens. But that usually happens with more complex songs or tunes you immediately want to hear again. I doubt that will happen here.)

Other songs fall flat, including a would-be spoof of a TV commercial and a number showing Trixie perform in a nightclub. (In that case, a poor song is undercut further by jokey costumes for the performers, the only stumble by costumer Jess Goldstein. The scene is further undermined by the unnecessary contrivance of having Ralph not show up for Trixie's big nightclub debut, which is absurd.)

Obviously, a musical with very few songs that click and none that stand out on their own isn't going to work. But the book is equally problematic. Ralph and Ed go to work at an ad agency and the villain who undermines them and attempts to sabotage their partnership is Bryce Bennett (Lewis Cleale). But he's a poor villain since from the very moment he's introduced we're shown that he's impotent. Bryce is merely a midlevel executive and the boss of the company is ready to fire him at any moment. Because the client loves Ralph and Ed, he's further hamstrung. So the idea that this guy is a threat just doesn't work. When he's fired at the end, we don't really care because he seemed so toothless to begin with. Worse, in very retro and unwelcome fashion, both he and another mid-level exec are indicated as gay, along with a real estate agent (perhaps). Since they're virtually the only unethical and unlikable characters in the show, it feels unpleasant and unnecessary, gayness played for cheap laughs rather than adding mild complexity to the 1950s setting. Little better are two other supporting roles. The Italian client whose cheese they're selling is just a dumb stereotype (he carries a gun in case he's displeased) while the gruff owner of the agency is only blandly menacing.

Having the guys enjoy financial success for good makes as much sense as having the family on *Roseanne* win the lottery. But at least the musical should have kept its focus on the four characters at its heart, not introduce dull villains. We're told Norton is really good at writing melodies, though we have to take this on faith since the three jingles we hear are pretty anonymous. In fact, when they do a big ad on live television at the end of the show I had no idea if we were supposed to think the jingle they'd written was terrible or great.

In the spirit of the original show, it would have made more sense to show Norton unexpectedly shine at writing music for jingles, blithely turning out one success after another while Ralph seethed with jealousy. We

know Alice actually wrote the best line in their winning jingle and Ralph could be angry and frustrated and then finally realize he's holding his friend back, quitting so Norton can be free to shine at his new job. That self-awareness and sacrifice for a pal would be perfect, especially if it came after Ralph was driven bonkers by Norton's success. This would keep the focus on them and not some extraneous plot device.

Of course, that would still leave Norton living the high life on Madison Avenue, an odd way for these working class guys to end up...even if Ed and Trixie's apartment was always a little nicer, a little better furnished than the threadbare home of Ralph and Alice. So why not have the ad execs or Ralph realize Norton is innocently plagiarizing classic songs? Or have Norton blithely admit it himself? That's not an original tune, they'd ask when the truth came out? "Of course it's original!" Norton would say. "Not by me, but somebody made it up!" When told he can't just use any old tune that pops into his head, Norton would respond, "I thought this job was too easy!" or "You thought I wrote all those tunes myself? You're crazier than Ralph!" or "If you wanted some new songs, why didn't you hire a songwriter?" Or, really anything other than deciding Norton would become a jingle-writing genius and discover unimaginable success.

SPOILER

Instead, Norton really is a musical genius. Worse, Ralph is given an unearned payday himself just so everyone can be showered with wealth at the end. (Did they ever watch the TV show?) And in the show's most bone-headed move, the action grinds to a halt at the finale as Ralph and the gang bump into the real Jackie Gleason. Instead of being a quick gag by using the understudy for the role (which would mildly amuse), in yet another meta gesture Gleason hears about their life, muses it would make a great basis for a TV show, introduces them to his friend Art Carney, asks for some stories from their neighborhood...and yes, this idiotic conceit goes on and on and on. All of these winking nods severely detract from the simple pleasures *The Honeymooners* embodies. The last thing we want is a jokey deconstruction, but the show gives us dancers who stop a number and complain about Ralph's flights of fancy, Norton referencing how there's only one more scene left in the show and the boondoggle of having the audience practically sit through a pitch meeting for *The Honeymooners* TV series when all we want is for Ralph and Alice to embrace one last time. They all end up on easy street when what we really want is to see Ralph driving his bus, maybe with Alice and Norton and Trixie by his side as they head home where they belong.

END OF SPOILER

On the plus side, the sets by Beowulf Boritt are pleasingly straightforward. They offer up the Kramden's modest apartment and with no fuss switch to the bus depot, a Madison Avenue office and a subway stop among other locations. The backdrop is dominated by a New York City skyline that harkens back to the visuals used in the title card and end credits of the syndicated reruns of the show, with a full moon romantically popping in at ripe moments. Anything more elaborate would be wrong for this show, so Boritt makes it look easy. Other tech elements are solid and a very hardworking supporting cast playing everything from bus drivers to ad execs to a Nativity scene flock of sheep and shepherds. The orchestra conducted by Remy Kurs is able as always and sounds bigger than its modest size.

Give the four main actors any three scripts from the series to perform and you'd have a real treat on your hands. And heck, a musical isn't so far-fetched — Jackie Gleason did the same thing in the mid-1960s, turning about ten old episodes into full-on musical episodes. Why shouldn't they sing? And dance? But it should be a pocket musical, not one filled with lavish would-be comic numbers like Trixie's banal "Keepin' It Warm" or a dumb commercial parody that pairs the baby Jesus with a push to sell cheese...and then stops for a pointless (if fiercely performed) two minute tap dance solo by a chorus member. We care about Ralph and Alice and Ed and Trixie, not office politics or dance numbers or ad campaigns as envisioned by Mel Brooks. The bigger it gets, the harder it falls. And not even Alice's show-stopping solo can cushion the blow.

Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

The Liar *** 1/2

Jitney *** 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) *** 1/2

Significant Other * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) ** (third visit, but *** if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) ** 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) *** 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) ****

The Light Years * 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) *** 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips **

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) *

Come From Away *

Miss Saigon **

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba * 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s **

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) ***

Latin History For Morons * 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

War Paint **

In and Of Itself ***

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) ***

The Antipodes **

Anastasia **

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory **

Oslo *** 1/2

The Little Foxes **

Groundhog Day ** 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O'Hara at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra **

A Doll's House, Part 2 *** 1/2

Bandstand ** 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) ***

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) **

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) ** 1/2

Rooms **

Arlington ***

All The President's Men (Public Theater one-night event at Town Hall) ** 1/2

Happy Days (w Dianne Wiest) *** 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret *** 1/2

The Whirligig * 1/2

Sojourners and Her Portmanteau **

Broadway By The Year 1997-2006 ***

The Boy Who Danced On Air ** 1/2

The Government Inspector ** 1/2

A Doll's House, Part 2 (with Julie White and Stephen McKinley Henderson) ***

Desperate Measures ***

REGISTER TO VOTE!!

It's easy, it's fun, it's empowering.

Here's a nonpartisan site that will allow you to easily access your state's voter registration site.

Are you in New York? You can register online right here.

If you don't register and vote, you don't get to complain.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the founder and CEO of the forthcoming website BookFilter, a book lover's best friend. Trying to decide what to read next? Head to BookFilter! Need a smart and easy gift? Head to BookFilter? Wondering what new titles came out this week in your favorite categories, like cookbooks and mystery and more? Head to BookFilter! It's a website that lets you browse for books online the way you do in a physical bookstore, provides comprehensive info on new releases every week in every category and offers passionate personal recommendations every step of the way. It's like a fall book preview or holiday gift guide — but every week in every category. He's also the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes.

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.