

Theater: The Quiet Pleasures of Bridges Of Madison County

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THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY ** 1/2 out of ****
GERALD SCHOENFELD THEATRE

Who would have guessed that a critically reviled novel by Robert James Waller would prove so enduring? The Bridges Of Madison County was the wholesome 50 Shades Of Grey of its day, a publishing phenomenon that sold some 50 million copies worldwide even though you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who admits to liking it.

Bizarrely, Clint Eastwood chose to direct and star in a film version. With Meryl Streep! That tough guy tackling this soap opera? Thanks to a canny screenplay by Richard LaGravenese, they turned the romantic mush into a thoughtful, sexy, focused film. (That should be no surprise; some of the best movies come from pulpy works.) LaGravenese worked wonders and Streep and Eastwood made the most of it, their nearly 20 years of age difference adding a helpful poignancy to this romance.

And now here is a Broadway musical with first-class talent on stage and behind the scenes. It's made with care. Jason Robert Brown has fashioned some wonderful, romantic music. The two leads are compelling. And unfortunately the book by Marsha Norman, the directorial choices of Bartlett Sher and even some of the well-made songs by Brown step by step manage to undo the creative re-imagining of the film, adding characters and bits of humor and backstory and a span of time that do nothing but get in the way of the quiet, bittersweet romance that is its reason for being.

In short, they've turned what should be an affecting chamber piece into a busy, crowded mess. The cast album will surely be enduring and anyone who chances to see it will find some hushed beauty a la Once. But there is a better, trimmer show tantalizingly in reach and that ultimately frustrates the viewer.

The story is simplicity itself. Francesca (the beautifully voiced Kelli O'Hara) is a war bride, an Italian woman who married an American soldier and found herself transplanted to the wide open spaces of Iowa. It's 1965, she's in her mid-40s, the children are squabbling teenagers and their likable if dull father Bud (Hunter Foster, good as always) is taking them to the State Fair. Francesca has chosen to stay home and is eagerly anticipating four days of peace and quiet where she can take long baths, sip iced tea and no one will be asking her what's for breakfast, what's for lunch, what's for dinner? She's not unhappy, really -- despite a frustrated desire to be an artist -- but a break from family demands? Heaven.

Up comes Robert Kincaid (Steven Pasquale), a photographer from National Geographic who's lost and needs directions to one of the area's famed covered bridges. Francesca insists on showing him the way, they strike up a tentative friendship and it soon blossoms into passionate romance. Francesca loves her children and is fond of her husband but this is fate! Will she be true to her wedding vows or be true to the passionate need for more than mild contentment that's burning inside her?

One can easily see the appeal of this tale and the fantasy of a dashing romantic figure who comes out of nowhere and tells you what you've always known: Your life should be far more romantic, passionate and exciting than this! But of course Francesca remains with her family, savoring the memory of this passion and knowing she did the right thing, or at least the only thing she could do and live with herself.

The scenic design of Michael Yeorgan, aided by the fine lighting of Donald Holder, creates a warm, wide-open storybook feel, with spare elements like a stairway, a stove, a window and some piling to indicate the home, the farm, the neighbors and the bridges Kincaid came to photograph. But throughout the show, secondary cast-members are seated onstage, watching the proceedings. Yes, in small town life no one is really alone, but this feels oppressive and accusatory, more like *The Scarlet Letter* than a Harlequin romance.

The book by Norman doesn't just send the rest of the family off to the fair -- it follows them there. Instead of seeing Francesca and Robert reveling in their private paradise and blissfully blocking out the world for a moment, we watch the kids come to a new understanding about their paths in life, see the father share a drink with strangers in a bar and hear all of them call home seemingly every five minutes with complaints and questions. The result is that Francesca and Robert are almost never alone on stage. Instead of an intimate, unexpected oasis, we're constantly reminded of the people Francesca is breaking faith with. This is an unasked for romance but with the children rarely out of sight and neighbors impassively watching, it feels more like a tawdry affair. That spoils everything.

Ironically, some of composer Brown's best songs are part of the distraction. Robert Kincaid's ex-wife Marian (Whitney Bashor, who kills with her one tune) sings a lovely faux Joni Mitchell tune called "Another Life." Friendly neighbor Marge (Cass Morgan) has fun with her comic number "Get Closer." Marge's husband Charlie (Michael X. Martin) leads off a big second act number "When I'm Gone." A more anonymous country tune "State Road 21/The Real World" is the sole weak number but unfortunately kicks things off after the intermission.

Yet even the best of these feels distracting. Martin and Morgan are pros and wisely don't become an intruding presence. Still, when the show is reaching its emotional climax, you can't help wondering why the minor character of Charlie is suddenly taking center stage. The same goes for all the subplots about a daughter nervous about the Steer Of The Year competition (a vivid Caitlin Kinnenen) and a son (a fine Derek Klena) who is trying pot and pondering any future but one stuck on a farm. The actors are solid, the songs are good...and it's all a waste of time. Towards the finale in "When I'm Gone," Francesca and Robert are literally lost in a crowd, their story overwhelmed by everyone else's story.

It's a pity because when you pare back the unnecessary, the two lovers and their songs are definitely strong enough to have remained the focus of a tighter, more intimate show. O'Hara and Pasquale are the same age so that creates a different dynamic than the man of the world vibe of the book or the much older man of experience from the movie. (Eastwood was 19 years older than Streep; in the book Robert is probably about eight years her senior.) But it's just as valid.

O'Hara sings beautifully and very convincingly with a subtle Italian accent to her English throughout. Pasquale matches her in belting out the big numbers and their chemistry is evident, though the humor and awkwardness as they warily get closer to passion is more effective than the tumbling around on bed. I'm looking forward to listening to their songs like "What Do You Call A Man?" and "Falling Into You" again and I'm sure they'll prove even stronger on repeated listens.

But we're given flashbacks to Italy featuring Francesca's free and easy sister and flash-forwards to college graduations and weddings and funerals and a decade or more of far-off pining. And it all just gets in the way. The most vivid moment is when everyone -- even the orchestra -- falls away and Robert and Francesca are alone onstage and he sings of his love for her in a song that stays boldly a cappella for quite awhile. The audience is hushed, the moment is lovely and for a while you can savor the quiet pleasures of *The Bridges Of Madison County* and glimpse the simpler show it should have dared to be.

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