

Theater: This Parade's Gone By With Jeremy Jordan

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PARADE IN CONCERT ** 1/2 out of ****

LINCOLN CENTER

It's been a rough few months -- at least commercially -- for [composer Jason Robert Brown](#) and [actor Jeremy Jordan](#). Other projects have not fared as well as they surely hoped. So it must have been sweet release to focus their energies on this: a one-night concert production of Brown's Tony-winning musical *Parade*. It was a spared-no-expenses evening with a super-sized New York City Chamber Orchestra and a chorus of more than 200 people backing a dream team of Broadway stars and rising talent. It would be financially impossible to mount anything like this in a commercial house and the enthusiastic, eager crowd ate it up.

After an all-too-brief Broadway run, *Parade* has grown in stature for theater folk, much like Stephen Sondheim's shows often seemed to become hits long after they closed. This complex, sprawling tale of a New York Jew wrongly hanged in Georgia for killing a 13 year old white girl is of course based on a true story that became a cause celebre from 1913 to his death in 1915. Even Thomas Edison and Henry Ford (no friend to Jews) denounced the trial of Leo Frank as a miscarriage of justice. If it's easy to say the story of racial prejudice in the South that ended with a lynching doesn't sound like a recipe for success, well neither does *Sweeney Todd* or *Chicago*.

But where those shows have a wicked sense of humor, *Parade* is deadly serious. Unquestionably, a concert production is not the best way to absorb this daunting work for newcomers like myself. (Most of the audience were clearly fans, applauding performers and songs right from the start.) In a concert production like this, the actors must create very nuanced portrayals on the fly and some of the book is invariably lost in the shuffle. (The book is by Tony winner Alfred Uhry.) For example, it took me a while to figure out exactly what character if any the wonderful [Ramin Karimloo](#) was playing when he began to pop up as a Greek chorus of sorts.

Our hero Leo Frank (Jordan) is a stiff, buttoned-up man with a starchy relationship to his sweet wife ([the lovely Laura Benanti](#)). He's quite unlikable and toss in the fact that he's a New York Jew incapable or unwilling of fitting in and you can see how he'd become a perfect target for local authorities. The show begins with an overview of the south, Frank's disbelieving arrest for the crime of murder and a frenzied rush to damn him from people either just excited to be in on something big or bullied into it by the authorities. A trial, his wife's conscience-pricking confrontation with the governor of Georgia and more all take place alongside songs that range from operatic to comic. It has enough powerful moments to make you understand why Brown was heralded from the start. The enviable cast assembled for this night gave it their all.

But the full complexity of the story was overwhelmed on this night. Jordan and Benanti couldn't really develop the subtle transformation their characters undergo and had to settle for emotional sparks and some broad brushstroke work. Since that's the emotional heart of the show, it left *Parade* a little stunted, through no fault of their own.

Worse was the technical presentation. Beowulf Boritt and Caite Hevner Kemp are credited with projection design. A concert performance can of course only modestly suggest setting and scene changes. Unfortunately, they chose to have the Georgia state flag prominently displayed with black and white photos overlaid on top of that image. It created a muddy, ugly and distracting effect, a minor but prominent issue. More tragic was the

audio. Jon Weston is the sound designer but the evening was plagued with repeated audio issues that seemed some combination of actors perhaps unused to actual mikes (as opposed to body mikes) and -- one assumes -- whoever was running the sound board missing their cues. Again and again, the crucial dialogue moving the story forward was lost because a mike hadn't been turned up in time for the actor's words to be heard. The same happened at the start of songs throughout.

One can only imagine how difficult it is to put on such a technically challenging show as this for one night only with limited rehearsal. But if the audio keeps dropping out, how the heck can we follow the story or relax and enjoy the music? In fact, a crucial moment -- the final words between Leo Frank and the soon-to-be-murdered girl Mary Phagan -- were muffled the first time around. I've no idea if it was a mistake or purposefully ambiguous since the same moment is replayed at the finale. Was it intended to be unknown and "revealed" at the end, as if we ever doubted Frank's guilt? Was it just a technical snafu? So many other moments were in fact snafus that I remained in doubt. A show this intellectually ambitious shouldn't have such barriers in the way of appreciating what they were doing. Standards were not met here.

And now the good news: the evening was still thoroughly enjoyable and featured enough great moments from Broadway veterans that Brown, his exhausted orchestra and the cast could indeed take their bows with pleasure. Certainly the audience roared its approval repeatedly, often deservedly so. Sometimes I felt the overly orchestrated, challenging numbers got in their own way. Time and again, the simpler and more direct moments succeeded better than the obviously ornate ones. But when given the chance, the actors delivered.

[Charlie Franklin](#) practically stole the show at the start with a terrific one-two punch: he gave a soaring performance of the opening number "The Old Red Hills Of Home" as a soldier returning from the Civil War and soon contrasted it nicely as a kid flirting with Mary Phagan in "The Picture Show." Later he simmered over as that same kid boiling with hate for Frank, making this evening a nice calling card for his talent.

Karimloo crooned nicely (as a hateful character) but had very little to do dramatically until late in the show. His *Les Miserables* co-star [Andy Mientus](#) in contrast had charm and chops to spare with a much more substantial role as a reporter in which to show it off. (Catch them both if you can in that very good revival.) Like some other elaborate numbers, "Real Big News" became a little muddled musically here but Mientus anchored it nicely.

Dramatically, the women fared best with Rachel De Benedet somehow creating a whole character as the wife of the governor in just a few brief lines. Benanti gave heft to the scenes between Lucille and her frustratingly cold husband Leo. The movie's heartbeat began with her performance. Jordan of course has magnetism to spare and a compelling voice. Given a little time, the very tricky dance an actor playing Leo must navigate would become more organic. Happily, his natural charisma allowed Jordan to make Leo perfectly uptight, knowing we'd go along with him for the ride. His solo moment at the trial ("It's hard to speak my heart") and the duet with Benanti at the penultimate moment were strong. Clearly, with time, their characterizations would become richer.

If Franklin seemed to steal the show at the start, by the end it was clearly in the hands of [Joshua Henry](#), playing the once and future convict Jim Conley. As he has so often before, Henry electrified the audience, this time with Act One's "That's What He Said" and Act Two's bitter and beautiful "Feel The Rain Fall."

If a work can give stars like Henry and Jordan and Benanti multiple chances to shine, rising talent like Mientus a great platform and a newcomer like Franklin a genuine boost, you know it's worth careful consideration and a loving presentation. I've no idea if a stripped-down version is more artistically satisfying or whether this everything-you-want presentation captures best the spirit of what Brown and his collaborators were going for all along. But it's a shame this Parade has passed by so quickly. At least with a few more nights, the technical glitches could be ironed out and more people would have a chance to catch a challenging show that flew by all too fast the first time around and has done so again.

THEATER OF 2015