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New Hope Free Press

A '42nd Street' Second To None At Bucks

42nd Street Bucks County Playhouse



Photo: Mark Garvin

By John Dwyer

In the middle of summer, nothing is more refreshing and more appropriate than a good, old fashioned all-American musical. And “42nd Street” at Bucks County Playhouse is just that.

It’s about the aspirations of a regular small town girl with the iconic name of “Peggy Sawyer” who dreams of making it in the big city. With determination and pluck, that is exactly what she does, by golly.

And this is also just the kind of musical that can unite all Americans who keep hope alive when it comes to dreaming The American Dream. Peggy is a singer and dancer from Allentown, Pennsylvania, who dreams of being in a Broadway show. She has the audacity to try out for the new musical, “Pretty Lady,” that stars legend Dorothy Brock and is directed by Julian Marsh. The next two hours are spent on her journey of what it takes to put on a show and how, due to unforeseen circumstances, opportunities can arise for stardom and maybe love.

(Pause)

All of the above was written prior to my seeing the show. I know this show very well. I played Abner Dillon back in the 1990s at Bucks County Playhouse, and recently saw an excellent production at Music Mountain Theater. I knew the show was solid with popular songs, and an audience crowd pleaser. With a cast of Broadway veterans and with Hunter Foster at the helm, it would be surprising for this *not* to be a success and a great show. What I was surprised at, however, was how I started thinking about other things that I have never done when either being in or seeing this show.



Photo: Mark Garvin

It does all come down to storytelling. Yes, this is a musical. And the songs are incredible. The music are classic standards by Harry Warren (music) and Al Dubin (lyrics). These include “You’re Getting to be a Habit with Me,” “Dames,” “We’re in the Money,” ”Shuffle off to Buffalo,” ”Lullaby of Broadway” and “42nd Street.” But what makes it a musical comedy and not a concert is a credible book and our being invested in the characters.

Hunter Foster is a gifted director and he knows how to weave the story. The script, of course, has the elements but Foster’s genius is knowing where to focus and what to cut or downplay. I never thought of this as a “Chorus Line” of its day and yet there are similarities that Foster’s production makes me think about. This is about idealistic kids coming from all over the country to be in a Broadway show. It has the added dimension of looking at those who have been in the business for a long time and seeing who they became. This is not to say that “42nd Street” should have won the Pulitzer for literature like “A Chorus Line” did, but it is to say that this director and this cast saw the script as more than just a clothes hanger to hang the songs and dances on.

Originally a 1933 movie musical that was nominated for Best Picture starring Ruby Keeler, Warren Baxter, Bebe Daniels, Dick Powell and Ginger Rogers, it became a Broadway musical in 1980 with Wanda Richert, Jerry Ohrbach, Tammy Grimes and Lee Roy Reams. The story is more than serviceable and does make a point. Youth aspires to create an identity, while at the other end of the spectrum, are those who try to hold on to an identity. And, if you get past the personal, you also discover the love of another and the love of your art is what keeps you going. The story and theme of the show normally get lost amidst all the tapping. And that is something this production can be especially proud about.



Go Into Your Dance (Photo: Mark Garvin)

The show starts with the stage ready for an audition, and while the audience is drifting into their seats, dancers in 1930s costuming drift onstage and warm up for their audition. It is one of many smart moves by the director. There is then no set beginning of the show. It, in fact, has already begun as you start to focus. This verisimilitude of a Broadway audition gets you in the mindset that you are being told the real story of what it means to go to an audition and get a part.

The casting is exceptional. This is the strongest Julian Marsh I have seen since Jerry Ohrbach originated the role in 1980. Matt Walton brings a New York moxie to the role that is reminiscent of James Caan. It is totally appropriate. It is what one would imagine a New York theater legend to act like. David Merrick, Arthur Laurents, Harold Prince all had a brash edge that Matt Walton has without even trying. It is just there. Tessa Grady shines as Peggy Sawyer, the hard working ingénue fresh off the bus in New York City. Grady is a triple threat. Her acting, singing and dancing make her a perfect Peggy Sawyer. Linda Balgord as Dorothy Brock has the presence to be a diva and still able to convey the weariness of being at the top of a difficult business for way too many years. Blakely Slaybaugh as Billy Lawlor, Dorothy Brock's much younger leading man in the show, has the requisite charm and, again, is a triple threat. He also has given Billy the a little tenor attitude that works well for the character. Also kudos to Matt Bauman as Andy Lee, the show choreographer, for being a spot on dancing dynamo and to the comic relief of Ruth Gottschall as Maggie Jones and Kilty Reidy as Bert Barry, who are the writing team of "Pretty Lady."



Gypsy Tea Kettle (Photo: Mark Garvin)

One thing that was missing in the show was the iconic Gower Champion choreography of dancing on a dime for “We’re in the Money.” The choice of choreographer Jeremy Dumont and director Hunter Foster did not affect the story and, in a sense, since it is so showy, helped the audience to focus on the through line of the characters and plot and not get distracted. The choreography is excellent throughout, from “Go into Your Dance” to “Dames” to “42nd Street.” Also noteworthy are scenic design by Anita Louizos, costume design by Nicole V. Moody and the incredible orchestra, headed by musical director William Shuler.

This is an exceptional production of “42nd Street,” with a larger cast and budget than the Playhouse has ever had. Its strong focus on story, along with its singing and dancing, gives you back the flavor of Times Square and the business of show business. The story zips along due to its strong direction. It is my favorite “42nd Street” so far, and I have seen many. “Little nifties from the fifties” and “sexy ladies from the eighties” are all there. “Where the underworld meets the elite” is exactly where ticket buyers should be going looking for a naughty, bawdy, gaudy, and sporty “42nd Street.”

Show runs through Aug. 4, and tickets are [available online](#).