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REVIEW: A new look at the 'New World' at Bucks County Playhouse



The cast of "New World" is shown. PHOTO BY Joan Marcus

By Frank Burd

In 1620, the Pilgrims landed in the New World and "discovered" America... Well, not really, Columbus had come in 1492. And the settlement in Jamestown, Virginia was founded in 1607. But the Pilgrims and Miles Standish and Thanksgiving are the foundations of American legend. The only problem was that these places already existed before the arrival of Europeans, and they already had names.

Bucks County Playhouse is producing a brand new musical about that infamous meeting between the Pilgrims and the Indians. This world premier is not just of the clashing of ideals, but a story about generational conflict- amidst each culture. But it is more than it. It is a love story. It is a clever comedy. And it is filled with songs, both smart and beautifully choreographed.

It succeeds on so many levels, beginning with the opening number. On stage is an odd collection of all types of ethnicities wearing costumes from varied eras that represent the Indians. I say Indians because in comic fashion, that's how they refer to themselves, even though we know they didn't use that name. Language is repeatedly tossed about with humorous effect. And from the get-go, the language barrier between two peoples is less of an issue than the barrier between parent and child.

That first song, “Harmony,” sung both by the Indians and the Pilgrims, sets up the inevitable encounter but also represents their “innocent” state of mind before the meeting. It is the first of so many clever songs. The music is strong, but the lyrics by Phoebe Kreutz, would make the great Oscar Hammerstien proud. They alone would make the price of a ticket worthwhile.

I also loved the unusual and effective casting. Neither age, gender, nor race got in the way in selecting such a strong cast. The Indian chief is Asian (Ann Harada), her son (Justin Guarini) is of mixed race, his brother (Clyde Alves) is white — and it all works superbly! As for the pious Miles Standish, the large imposing figure of Eddie Cooper, is perfect as the blustering religious zealot. His daughter, Susanna Standish (Jillian Gottlieb) might have the best voice in the cast and it interesting to see it develop from a more innocent, childish voice to that of a young woman.

I can go on and on about the cast. There is so much comic relief from Alves, from Jennifer Perry, and from Tyler Maynard (who plays a turkey). But the whole cast joins in the fun with zingers. It’s not profound, it’s silly. But sometimes, that’s all we need for an evening at the theater.

In development for some seven years, “The New World” connected itself to the new musical development program at the Playhouse, where so many famous musicals got their start. As we approach the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrim’s landing, it is a pleasure to see such an energetic and joyous retelling of that story. “The New World” has a bright future.

IF YOU GO

Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main Street, New Hope, PA 18938, 215-862-2121, bcptheater.org, thru Dec. 2, 2017