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Review: ‘The New World’ at Bucks County Playhouse

By [Neal Newman](#) on November 12, 2017



A Thanksgiving musical? We can think of musicals that sometimes involve that observance, but an entire show about how the holiday evolved? Bucks County Playhouse’s [The New World](#) may be onto something here. The show runs through December 2, and Anna Louizos’ set design certainly evokes autumn in Massachusetts. One of the songs about that famous dinner (“Mix It Up”) is about trying new foods. The cast is a total racial mix, and the number soon becomes a celebration of modern diversity.



The ensemble. Photo by Joan Marcus.

Bucks County Playhouse is especially proud of *The New World*. They have regularly produced new musicals such as [*Cake Off*](#) and [*Rock and Roll Man*](#), but this is the first show they have nurtured right from the beginning with a 45-minute reading. The production is professional all the way.

Louizos' set evokes the many locals of the 1620 New World, in a splendid array of colors. Kirk Bookman's lights bathe the trees and seashore in a nostalgic haze, but also evoke the burlesque qualities of the script with vaudeville flashes and theatrical spotlights. Jen Caprio's costumes are an anachronistic hoot, with the Indians (that's the word the authors use) dressed as modern tourists, and the Pilgrims wearing outfits resembling their traditional attire. Paul Masse leads a hot band through the up-tempo score with excellent orchestrations by four-time Tony nominee Danny Troob. Lorin Latarro's choreography is pure Broadway, fitting the anachronistic mood.

The plot involves the culture clash between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans. The Indians are so attuned to the land that merely watering it causes corn to rise like magic. The Pilgrims are more problematical. As Miles Standish explains early on: "I shall not let other people in with their other way of doing things. And nothing says, 'Keep Out!' like a moat." The exceedingly religious pilgrims are also sexually repressed. As one eager young lady puts it: "All you care about is the size of a man's Bible. It's the testaments that matter." Later on, Standish's daughter falls in love with an Indian brave, and matters begin to take their course.

The book by L.F. Turner and Regina DeCicco is filled with similar jokes. The opening night audience loved it, but such humor, which would have been at home 80 years ago in Phil Silvers' old burlesque act, is definitely a matter of taste. The Indian bride's family comes from more upscale Connecticut and they are the Corn Family. The Father is Colonel Corn, the mother is Candy Corn and the beautiful daughter is Creamy Corn. Remember the Disney *Pocahontas*? Remember how the Native American heroine had two animal friends: a bird and a raccoon? Well, the Native hero here has a pet as well: a turkey. Carl, the turkey, doesn't talk – he gobbles. But he can dance.



Justin Guarini and Jillian Gottlieb. Photo by Joan Marcus.

If you loved the recent Broadway hit [*Something Rotten!*](#), you might like this. That show, however, began with a nonsensical premise and developed its silliness in inventive and surprising ways. But *The New World* is essentially a one-joke show. The characters introduce their cultures in the opening number, “Harmony,” and the remaining two hours are variations on this single idea. The same is true of Phoebe Kreutz’ lyrics, which take an idea and then fail to develop it. When the daughter, Susanna (Jillian Gottlieb), examines the typical hand-raised “Indian greeting,” she raises her hand and sings:

How. How. How’d ya get to be so handsome?
How. How. How’d ya get to be so tall?

That’s it. There are no developmental ideas, only repetitions. Structure, development and the occasional surprise are needed for a good show tune. Gary Adler’s relentlessly upbeat score has one major power ballad, “Live My Dream,” in which the mother tells her son that his job is to forget his future and live hers. This excellent idea is never developed into a memorable or theatrical lyric.

Bucks County has pulled out all the stops with the casting. The program bios for the actors list leading roles in successful Broadway shows like *On the Town* and *Kinky Boots*. Leading the large cast are Ann Harada of *Avenue Q* and *Cinderella*, and Justin Guarini of *American Idol*, *Women on the Verge* and *Paint Your Wagon*. Harada plays Hyannis, the Indian Chief, dressed in a fetching pantsuit, and her Broadway belt frequently brings the house down with “Massachusetts” and the aforementioned “Live My Dream.” Guarini anchors the show as Indian brave Santuit with his powerful singing and energetic personality. The songs “Lone Wolf” and “Natural” are highlights because of his performance. Eddie Cooper brings tremendous voice and presence to Miles Standish. Director Stafford Arima directs in the true burlesque manner with large, almost camp, performances that fit the style of the musical. (One of the Massachusetts Indians even speaks with a Harvard accent.)

The New World didn’t have enough meat and potatoes for my taste, but if you’re like those folks in the opening night audience, this may just be the Thanksgiving feast for you. After all, lots of people really love the taste of corn.

Running Time: Two hours, including an intermission.



Ann Harada and Clyde Alves. Photo by Joan Marcus.

[The New World](#) plays through Saturday, December 2, 2017 at the Bucks County Playhouse – 70 South Main Street, in New Hope, PA. For tickets, call the box office at (215) 862-2121, or purchase them [online](#).