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Starring an old 'Idol,' 'The New World' roasts Thanksgiving history: review



"The New World," playing now at Bucks County Playhouse, is a quirky and occasionally irreverent version of the fabled first meal. (Joan Marcus)

By [Patrick Maley](#)
For NJ Advance Media

Thanksgiving draws near, and while most of us are either looking forward to stuffing and wine or dreading family and overeating, the Bucks County Playhouse is welcoming the holiday with a world premiere musical, "The New World," a quirky and occasionally irreverent version of the fabled first meal shared by starving Pilgrims and hospitable Native Americans. Inventive in its approach and snappy in its comedy, if a bit formulaic throughout, the show finds plenty of humor and a bit of charm by creatively reinventing this very familiar story.

Apocryphal history rendered as RomCom, the musical has lots of fun in its flouting conventions of history and American mythology: Native Americans sport a stylish summertime-on-the-Cape wardrobe as they plan the season's most fabulous wedding, while the puritanical newcomers bumble their way through the woods convinced that God will provide shelter and food. Chief Massasoit (Ann Harada) has

arranged a politically advantageous marriage between her son Santuit (Justin Guarini, of "American Idol" fame) and Creamy Corn (Gina Le Vine), the beautiful young jewel of the powerful Corn tribe. But Santuit's heart resists the arrangement and he flees with his best friend, a turkey named Carl (Tyler Maynard in what is nothing short of a star turn as seasonal fowl) to the woods where he stumbles upon Susanna (Jillian Gottlieb), a beautiful and helpless ingenue Pilgrim meandering along an ill-conceived quest to find food for her cohort. You can figure out the rest: worlds collide, love blossoms, hijinks ensue, so on and so forth.

But the show's creators (book by Regina Decicco and L.F. Turner, music by Gary Adler, lyrics by Phoebe Kreutz) seem much less interested in creatively pushing the boundaries of musical theater than they are in squeezing the most comedy they can out of those familiar structures. In Santuit's brother Tago (Clyde Alves) we have a blockhead second fiddle here reimagined as a wonderfully anachronistic South Bostoner. Pilgrim Joan (Jennifer Perry) may be an aging spinster, but she is also a wise-cracking independent woman ("What did you do?" asks Susanne when she learns about Joan's religious condemnation, "The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker" replies Joan, unashamed. Good gag).

The show, especially in its bouncy, jaunty musical numbers, is full of this sort of sharp, rimshot-worthy comedy, but it succeeds by committing itself fully to genre. The show's creators have inventively shrugged off any confines of faithful history, but nonetheless situate their work neatly and effectively within a long tradition of musical romantic comedy.

The show's efforts to buck historical conscription include colorblind casting, as performers from a broad swathe of races and ethnicities populate both the European and Native American parties. In a 17th century where characters sip cocktails out of martini glasses and wear culottes, certainly it makes sense that the leaders of factions from England and pre-colonial Massachusetts would be an African-American man and an Asian-American woman. Still, among this admirable resistance to racial limitations, we find that the majority of the show's principle roles are filled by white performers. For a show that regularly mocks the imperialist bravado of white Europeans, producers could have made greater efforts to diversify their leads. Theater is of course far from immune to the historical effects of European whitewashing, and "The New World" offers a great opportunity--here missed--to work against that deleterious historical trend.

THE NEW WORLD

Bucks County Playhouse

70 S Main Street, New Hope, Pa.

Tickets available online (<https://bcptheater.secure.force.com/ticket>), running through November

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