

<http://www.burlingtoncountytimes.com/entertainmentlife/20171111/musical-the-new-world-brings-laughs-and-message-of-unity-to-bucks-county-playhouse>

November 12, 2017

BUCKS COUNTY
Courier Times

The Intelligencer

Burlington County Times

Musical ‘The New World’ brings laughs and message of unity to Bucks County Playhouse



Justin Guarini, filling in for injured Julius Thomas, III, and Jillian Gottlieb star as the lovers whose story is the heart of “The New World” (JOAN MARCUS/BUCKS COUNTY PLAYHOUSE)

By Andy Vineberg

World-premiere musical “The New World,” which opened this week at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, casts a comic light on the story of the Pilgrims and the Native Americans.

The long-mythologized “first Thanksgiving” between the Native Americans and Pilgrims 396 years ago probably wasn’t quite the harmonious feast folklore has led us to believe — which makes it not so different than the typical Thanksgiving dinner today.

And also perfect fodder for a musical comedy.

“It’s a fairy tale that kind of illuminates our values, and we took it to the level of trying to make it about America today, sort of America looking to get along with itself,” said stand-up comedian Regina DeCicco, co-writer of “The New World,” a world-premiere musical that opened this week at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope. “We’ve got this history of dysfunction — you see all these pictures of everyone smiling around the Thanksgiving table, when in reality you know there’s always dysfunction at that table. Thanksgiving can be a real struggle. A lot of people don’t want to be at their own tables.”

Whether the Wampanoag Indians and Pilgrims really wanted to share a table in the Plymouth Colony in 1621 is open to debate (there were certainly practical reasons for the union), but there’s no disputing the vast differences between their two cultures. DeCicco and co-writer L.F. Turner mined those differences for humor in their fictional (yet thoroughly researched) version of this famous moment in American history.

“When the Pilgrims arrived in the new world, they were very cloistered, not very open-minded about a lot of things — about gender roles, about faith, about others,” Turner said. “By contrast, the people they met once they reached what became Massachusetts were much more open, much more forward-thinking than the Pilgrims themselves were ready to understand.

“That interested us, this meeting of two very different points of views, not just in terms of location and culture, but also in how they approached the world. That has resonance to us today, the way everyone sees the world from their own particular vantage point, from their culture or upbringing or religious background. It’s very much the framework people use to view others.”

How do you turn such serious themes into a musical comedy? Well, you start with a love story (“We wanted to write a very much old-fashioned comedy, and every old-fashioned comedy is a love story at heart,” Turner said), and add a crowd-pleasing score from Phoebe Kreutz (lyrics) and “Altar Boyz’s” Gary Adler (music), some rousing song-and-dance numbers, a script that incorporates multiple styles of humor and, oh, yes, a talking turkey (Tyler Maynard, one of multiple Broadway veterans in the cast).

“Before I went to the audition I read the script, and I’ve never read a script and belly-laughed like that,” said Jillian Gottlieb, of Linwood, Atlantic County, who stars as Susanna Standish, the woman whose emotional journey is at the heart of the story. “I was rolling on the floor laughing.

“I had no idea what the music would be like, but I figured if the script was that funny, the music would be amazing as well. I learned one of the songs for the audition, and I was sold right away. It was one of the best songs I’d ever heard. I knew I had to get this part.”

Director Stafford Arima (Broadway’s “Allegiance”) was brought on early in the process and helped DeCicco and Turner refine a story they had begun working on about nine years ago.

Watching it come together has been particularly rewarding for DeCicco, a performer by nature who had no previous experience in musical theater.

“You can always love it yourself, but the more people who come on board, that’s when you sort of realize you have something,” said DeCicco, whose credits include behind-the-scenes work on “Saturday Night Live” and the NBC sitcom “Whoopi.” “You can have this goofy idea of a grown man dressed as a turkey, and now there’s a man onstage dressed as a turkey. That’s the reality of what we’ve done.

“It came from such a silly place, and now it’s happening. Watching so many people bring the whole thing to life, knowing there’s a whole theater employed making ‘The New World’ happen, that’s really incredible.”

Not that there haven’t been a few hiccups. Leading man Julius Thomas III (Broadway’s “Motown the Musical”), who stars as the Indian Santuit, was injured in rehearsal at the start of this week and was replaced for preview performances by “American Idol” first-season runner-up Justin Guarini, a Doylestown resident and a member of the Playhouse’s board of directors. There was no word when Thomas would return.

The cast also includes Broadway veterans Ann Harada (“Avenue Q”) as Chief Massasoit, Jennifer Perry (“Kinky Boots”), Ann Sanders (“Frozen”) and Clyde Aves (“On the Town”), as well as Ginna Le Vine, the grandniece of Oscar-winning actress Grace Kelly, who made her stage debut at the Bucks County Playhouse in 1949.

The show, which received its first reading at the Playhouse’s Oscar Hammerstein Festival in 2014, predates last year’s presidential election, but its message of unity at a time when the country is so fiercely divided certainly rings true. DeCicco said the script didn’t change after the election, but the way people heard certain lines did.

“With everything going on, it really makes you think about the message — how do we get along, how do we understand each other,” she said. “We can’t continue like this. A lot of healing needs to happen, and that can only come from communication.

“It’s comedy with a message. You can’t please everyone, but with big songs, and singing and dancing, how can you go wrong?”

Heeding the message of “The New World” won’t change the world, but it’s a start.

“If every single person sees this show, I think we’ll be fine,” DeCicco quipped. “I can only hope.”