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'New World' at Bucks County: Guarini, Thanksgiving, and a talking turkey, oh, my



Ann Harada and Clyde Alves (center) and cast in "The New World," through Dec. 2 at Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope.

By John Timpane

[The New World, running through Dec. 2 at Bucks County Playhouse](#), is a world-premiere musical about the first Thanksgiving. It's very funny. It has Justin Guarini as the male lead, Santuit; he and his feathery vibrato are in good form. Jillian Gottlieb as Susana Standish (daughter of Miles) is a winning, persuasive comic actor, has a great Jersey accent (as against the tribes' working-class Bostonian), and can sing to fill a theater. It has a few good tunes, a diverse cast (thank you), and a worthwhile theme (get over yourself and live well with others).

It also has a talking turkey named Carl (Tyler Maynard, the hit of the night).

With sneaky brilliance, beginning to end, this show undercuts itself and our expectations. Thus it nimbly avoids schmaltz and stereotype. I groaned when I heard the hackneyed tom-toms that too often signal “Indians!” But *The New World*’s tribespeople dress in contempo haute leisure! Chief Hyannis (full-voiced, wry Ann Harada) sports a white pantsuit. Her people see themselves as civilized. As the tribe sings of “Harmony” with nature, the Pilgrims, led by Miles Standish (played with confused bluster by honey-voiced Eddie Cooper) come onshore with their own “Harmony,” ready to kill anybody who gets in the way. The two sides do one of the strangest Rockettes-style dances ever. “Other people ruin everything,” we hear.

Such undercutting keeps *The New World* fresh, funny, and fluid. What a clever book by L.F. Turner and her sidekick, stand-up comic Regina DeCicco! The songs, with music by Gary Adler and especially lyrics by Phoebe Kreutz, drive character and situation, with some of the night’s best lines. “Massachusetts” is a droll tune about how we indigenes roll. Guarini’s big song is “Lone Wolf,” when he and Carl (his best bud) decide to go it alone. Guarini’s voice and the playhouse are very good to each other. “Look on the Bright Side” is sung by starving Pilgrims (ha ha!). “Natural,” a fine duet by Guarini and Gottlieb, concerns prejudice, natural versus un-



Justin Guarini as Santuit and Jillian Gottlieb as Susanna Standish in the world-premiere of “The New World,” through Dec. 2 at Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope.

“Live My Dream,” Harada’s best, is mom’s reminder to son that your future “is not yours.” “Indian Summer” is a ridiculous riot pairing Tago, a Fonz-like indigenous lad (well sung and danced by Clyde Alves), and battered, randy Aunt Joan, played with old-school dance-house belt by Jennifer Perry.

Susanna, Joan, and Hyannis are the three pillars. Susanna is after love, yes, and Joan after anything close – but mostly, these women speak of other things: how to survive, reach across, make life work. They are funny and carry their points.

“Other People,” a summing-up, is one of the best songs of the night. Sure, get along with others – but happily ever after? Well ... Hyannis and Miles Standish don’t know if they like this, or each other. With satirical edge, Susanna says she’s “thankful for the other people I’m forced to know.” Then we careen into “Mix It Up,” a culinary metaphor for interracial recombination. Potatoes and gravy. Carl makes a big contribution.

This show could have a long regional life, plenty of holiday shows, and, hey, a cult film. I can’t say I was humming the tunes afterward, but I was laughing the laughs.

The New World. Through Dec. 2 at Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope. Tickets: \$40-\$80. Information: 215-862-2121, bcptheater.org.