



November 22, 2017

Review: Bucks County Playhouse 'The New World'

By Neal Zoren

In the precarious and often disappointing world of new plays, and particularly of new musicals, the Bucks County Playhouse has brought forth on this continent a rare unmitigated discovery of the delectable kind with its world premiere of "The New World."

Hilariously loopy, ecstatically luscious, flippantly irreverent, "The New World" operates on so many levels, it's daunting to figure how to calculate them, let alone present them.

Let's start with the show being fun. It has a point, and even a heart, but librettists L.F. Turner and Regina DiCicco, lyricist Phoebe Kreutz, and composer Gary Adler mostly aim to have good brittle, biting fun. "The New World" is, above all, smart, planting guffaw-worthy jokes within its book and lyrics and harkening back to a time when musicals featured tunes and grandly entertained.

The beauty part is it manages within its basic forbidden boy-meets-forbidden girl format to say some salient things about immigration and about cultures putting down muskets, passing peace pipes — symbolically — and getting along.

The result is a rollicking good time enjoying material that comes from astute minds that get their shtick in but never pander and might shoot low but never cheap.

The writers set their show in 1620 when the Puritans land in Plymouth to find the Massasoit tribe already implanted there and enjoying a genteel civilization complete with social status and snobbery.

The Native Americans wear modern dress, some quite chic, and have typical musical comedy problems, such as how to arrange an auspicious, politically advantageous marriage for a son who is destined to be the Massasoit chief. Matters are complicated when the anointed prince wants no part of the nuptials and prefers to run off with his pet turkey, his confidante and friend whose gobble he can translate to English.

The Pilgrims, though landed, are in the same boat. They want to create a separate, monolithic colony devoted to whatever their leader, Miles Standish, deems righteous. But they have to deal with unexpected hardships, including a funeral a day, at least, and the rebellious leanings of Standish's daughter, Susanna — especially after she sees the bolting chief-to-be.

You see where this going. Turner, DiCicco, Kreutz, and Adler have created a work that could play in several decades of musical theater history and, blessedly, leavens this one. The goofy plot, blending the posh Native Americans and the scuffling newcomers, is like a 1930s comedy in which the story, or its plausibility, didn't matter as long as the jokes were crisp, lyrics were witty, and the music was bright and tuneful.

The smart writers find myriad ways to show the foibles of both the Native American and Pilgrim camps. They laugh happily and with the right amount of mischief at today's poisonous political correctness, staying on the windy side of taste while getting in some shots that would give any self-appointed propriety police occasion to gasp. It's all just too, too delightful.

The Native Americans are led by their chief, Massasoit (Ann Harada), who wears a Hillary-esque white pantsuit (but better tailored and more wittily patterned) and plots for both peace and social ascendancy by marrying her son off to a country-clubbish Connecticut tribe. Here the authors and costumer Jen Caprio lavish us with satire. The father of the intended bride (Rod Singleton) is dressed in various versions of suburban casual wear or golf outfits while the mother (Ann Sanders) is tres chic in a red sheath, and the daughter (Ginna LeVine) sports a snazzy, bright yellow sun dress. Banter between the tribes smacks of delicious 1960s-sitcom one-upmanship.

The Puritans are a tough and grizzled breed. Standish (Eddie Cooper) preaches goodness but eschews tolerance or any difference of opinion. When Massasoit is informed the Europeans have lenders, she says, "There goes the neighborhood," and spouts wisdom that by declaring, "If we ignore them, they'll starve to death or go home. Either way, we'll be rid of them."

The Pilgrims just want to keep others out. Standish plans to build a moat, and in the song in which the Puritans introduce their tenets, they sing about slicing the throat of anyone who disagrees. Charming, huh? Standish's sister, Joan (the stupendous Jessica Perry) pretty much encapsulates Puritan feelings about outsiders by quoting her mother who constantly told her, "Other people ruin everything."

If it wasn't for the old Hollywood love affair between Standish's daughter (the divine Jillian Gottlieb) and Massasoit's wayward turkey-lovin' son, Santuit (the brilliant Justin Guarini), Mama's maxim would rule the day amid the Natives who say, "What did you discover? You might notice we're already here," and the Puritans' "We will seal out all who are different from us."

Besides sparks and a few choice words, such as "savage" and "naive," flying between them, there is definitely a combination of Cupid's love dust and good old hormonal attraction. These are the characters who take individuals as individuals, as does the turkey (a clever Tyler Maynard) and, eventually, Joan and Santuit's elder brother (gravity defying Clyde Alves).

Stories unfold in a way that is formulaic but exuberantly lively and chocked full of moments that force legitimate chuckles. Stafford Arima's direction is brisk and with the right amount of self-conscious comic turns. Lorin Latarro's dances amplify the energy and give a sterling cast more talent to show off.

Guarini, often seen at BCP, continues to be a wonder. His presence is so natural, in a Tom Hanks kind of way, yet he nails every line and nuance without having to hammer anything home. This kind of ease that doesn't let a trick go by is rare.

Jillian Gottlieb brings such wit and a clarion voice to her performance. Powerhouse Jennifer Perry is endowed with the best wise cracks and dominates the stage without hogging it. Ann Harada is a dynamo who brings irony to her part and belts out her numbers with aplomb. Eddie Cooper matches Harada's caustic tone as Standish, adding a little Puritan starch to his bearing. Rod Singleton and Ann Sanders are perfect as the posh Connecticut Yankees. Ginna LeVine thoroughly embodies the conventionally snobby ingenue she plays. Clyde Alves is funny as Santuit's brother and creates a sensation each time he breaks

into Latarro's choreography. Tyler Maynard invents a language and loveable manner for a sarcastic, easily offended fowl. His blues riff is an inspired riot.

The writers, especially lyricist Kreutz, all provide a witty sheen. Adler and Kreutz's score deserves celebration, for its variety and cunning, but also for crafting its tunes in the style of the great musicals of the 1950s and '60s, eschewing the non-melodic twaddle of the 1980s on and staying blissfully far away from rock or hip-hop. These are real songs, whether silly like "It's a Wigwam," breezily romantic like "How," or able to be sung outside "The New World" like "Natural."

This return to the classic songbook genre of yesteryear is reward in itself. Perhaps best of all, the writers accentuate all the positives of cultures comingling while avoiding being heavy-handed or wandering ickily into the territory of the politically correct.

Anna Louiszos's set adds to the fun while bring versatile. Jen Capri's costumes go beyond hitting the mark, being simultaneously dead-on and over the top. Paul Masse's band enhanced the liveliness, the opening notes parodying movie music as the scene pans to an Indian reservation, beginning "The New World" with anticipatory flair.

In this current world, "The New World" is a welcome, encouraging tonic.

The New World, Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope, Pennsylvania. Through Saturday, December 2, Tuesday and Wednesday, 7:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday, 8 p.m. and Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday, 2 p.m. \$40 to \$75. 215-862-2121 or www.bcptheater.org.