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Bucks County's '42nd Street': From Allentown (!) to Broadway, with great song and dance



MARK GARVIN

(Left to right:) Matt Walton, Tessa Grady and Blakely Slaybaugh lead the company of "42nd Street," through Aug. 4 at the Bucks County Playhouse.

By John Timpane

A New York theatrical producer was saying to me lately, "Everywhere you go these days, be the venue big or small, the average talent level is just getting higher and higher." That's richly on display in *42nd Street*, [running through Aug. 4 at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope](#).

This company can dance up a cavalry charge: The show is a feast of surprisingly precise and athletic tap. They can act as well as required by a vehicle like *42nd Street*, often movingly. And they can really sing, crucial, for this celebration of the superb songs of Harry Warren and Al Dubin.

First staged in 1980 and perennial since then, *42nd Street* is adapted from the [1933 film by that title](#), in which Peggy Sawyer, a young woman from Allentown gets off the bus in New York and is thrust into the lead of a make-or-break Broadway musical at the height of the Depression ("You have 25 pages, six songs, and 10 dance numbers to learn by tomorrow night!"). Corny? Well, this backstage melodrama is the *origin* of all that stuff, from 1933 to *Glee*. Plucky, feisty, spunky Peggy (played with 100-watt smile by

Tessa Grady, bobby pins flying as she dances around the stage), begins to doubt herself: “I don’t think I can do it – I’m just a girl from Allentown.” Her exacting director, Julian (rock-jawed Matt Walton, whom, along with several others in this cast, you’ll recognize from TV), says, “What was that you just said? *Allentown*?” Gales of laughter from the New Hope audience.

The ensemble dance numbers are swell, particularly “We’re in the Money,” which drew huge, spontaneous applause, with song-and-dance man Blakely Slaybaugh, an Art Deco urban backdrop, ’30s-era high-pitched chorines, and that great hoofing. And “42nd Street” is the showstopper it’s meant to be. All the dancers are good, but I singled out Sean Bell, Darrell T. Joe, Brianna Latrash, and Alyssa Gardner as especially watchable.

To the songs. In their tune “Dames,” Dubin and Warren ask, “Who writes the words and music for all the girly shows?/ No one cares, and no one knows.” Well, we should care. *42nd Street* is a “jukebox musical,” collecting tunes they wrote for film musicals from 1933-39: “You’re Getting to Be a Habit with Me,” with its frank addiction-based lyrics; the sunny, smutty “Shuffle Off to Buffalo,” in a bravura number [directly inspired by the film](#); the ubiquitous, brilliant “I Only Have Eyes for You”; and the title tune, brilliantly written to work as both a smoky, bluesy torcher and an almost desperate urban gallop. As with most jukeboxers, some songs are jammed in awkwardly, because they want to be included despite the plot. I always felt one more rewrite by adapters Michael Stewart and Mark Bramble could have fixed that. But the tunes are still wondrous and well-delivered. They are the stars of the show.

This is what Bucks County does well. Director Hunter Foster keeps the pacing deft, as he did so handily in the aforementioned *Guys and Dolls*. Anna Louizos’ set design is various and clever, and Nicole V. Moody has great fun with the costumes. Walton is magnetic as Julian, Grady is an attractive Peggy, and Ruth Gottschall (another TV face!) is droll as songwriter Maggie Jones. And that very capable ensemble had the crowd standing even before the bows.

Through Aug. 4 at the Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main Street, New Hope. **Tickets:** \$40-\$80. **Information:** 215-862-2121, bcptheater.org.