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'The New World' At Bucks County Playhouse Is A Cornucopia Of Musical Delight



(Photo: Joan Marcus)

By John Dwyer

"The New World" was originally titled "Thanks," and judging from the standing ovation, the audience was certainly grateful for this brilliant new show at Bucks County Playhouse (BCP). In fact, the show and performers deserved every clap and every minute that the excited crowd stood and applauded.

"The New World" has been in development for three years at BCP. It is the product of The Oscar Hammerstein Festival's musical development program. Last year, it generated "Cake Off," but it had already been seen at the Signature Theater in New York City in a less expanded 90-minute format in 2015. With "The New World," we have BCP more fully involved at the inception of the show. The semantics of development perhaps, not so oddly, mirror the language of childbirth and child rearing. Ideas are conceived and nurtured, there is development, and with the birth of a musical and its continued growth through workshops, those committed to its welfare certainly take a kind of ownership of it that seems like a parent.

The show was conceptualized by the composer Gary Adler (Altar Boyz). It is a mashup of our contemporary values and perspectives versus our Puritanical roots. It is like the elementary school play of the First Thanksgiving if it were written by Tina Fey. But, in this case, it was instead written by the equally talented and funny L.F. Turner and Regina DeCicco. It reminds one of those classic stage and

movie shows, with guys who just wanted a girl to fall in love with and girls who wanted the same. The music has moments of being smooth and jazzy and moments of being all out, Broadway show stopping. Adler, along with lyricist Phoebe Kreutz, wanted to write songs with a tip of the hat to classic shows, and they have succeeded!

Speaking of the Great White Way, that was precisely what the Pilgrims felt about their traditions and customs versus native Americans. When Miles Standish (Eddie Cooper) arrives with other pilgrims to Massachusetts, he is surprised to see anyone there. And, as the natives are not God-fearing European Christians, he knows they must be savages. The smart script has the Indians in contemporary garb with contemporary manners, with enough of a tinge of native American custom to keep it real.

As an audience member, you can't help but identify more with the woman in the designer pant suit, who is the Indian leader

Santuit meets Miles Standish's daughter, the beautiful, resourceful, sweet and perky, Susanna Standish (Jillian Gottlieb). Without giving away more of the plot, suffice it to say their meeting complicates things. Other characters in the story are Miles Standish's sister, Joan (Jennifer Perry), who is Puritan by choice, but not by nature, and Santuit's brother, Tago (Clyde Alves). Tago is an outlier, a bit of a rebel. Not a normal Indian male as he prefers to be a gatherer and not a hunter, and bucks gender roles. Last, but not least, there is Carl the Turkey (Taylor Manard). He is Santuit's best friend, and due to their special relationship and Santuit's native abilities, they are able to talk to each other.

What ensues delights and inspires. Kudos to the creative team, BCP and the musical development group, and to Stafford Arima for directing this talented ensemble of actors. The pivotal role of Santuit was to be played by Julius Thomas III. But due to an injury, he was unable to do the role. Justin Guarini stepped in with only a few days to rehearse. Guarini is a BCP board member and starred in their critically acclaimed production of "Company." His rendition of the song "Lone Wolf," is seductively smooth. It should be mentioned that casting is racially blind, which is pertinent to the show's American Melting Pot point of view. If Thomas comes back to the role, the mosaic changes once again.

Jillian Gottlieb as Susanna Standish sings what I consider to be the show-stopper of the evening, "Other People." She is someone to watch, with a great career ahead of her.

Everyone loves the quintessential tough-talking, wise-cracking woman that was often seen in the classic stage and movie comedies. As a reference, think Joan Blondell or Rosalind Russell in the movies, Dorothy Loudon on stage, or Jennifer Perry in "The Lost World" as Susanna's Aunt Joan. She is delightful and brash and can belt out a song like nobody's business.

This ensemble is so strong. Ann Harada as Chief Hyannis owns the stage, as she struts it, extolling how they do things in Massachusetts, in the song actually titled "Massachusetts." This cocky tune includes a great dance break, choreographed by the talented choreographer Lorin Latarro and featuring Clyde Alves, a.k.a. Tago, doing a tap solo. Eddie Cooper as Miles Standish preaches the gospel of bonnets, buckles and Bibles, as he sings the rousing "Shine Your Buckles, Boys" to the pilgrim congregation. Tyler Maynard is as adorably playful as a young Bill Irwin, as the charismatic Carl the Turkey.

The director Stafford Arima's excellent staging, which includes a well thought out use of the turntable, was supplemented by the equally excellent set designs by Anna Louizos, costumes by Jen Caprio, lighting by Kirk Bookman, sound by Joshua D. Reid, and wigs and makeup by J. Jared Janas. The man who keeps

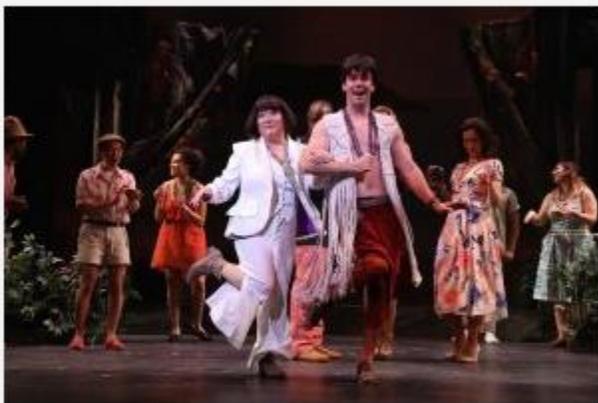
the beat is music director Paul Masse, with an assist by the man who orchestrated the beat, Danny Troob.

This show is timely and smart, and has great potential to make it to New York and beyond. Of course, musicals are autonomous, with a life of their own. They will be judged on many levels: Is it engaging? Does it have something to say? Is it smart? Is it witty? “The New World” is top-notch musical theater, exhilarating from beginning to end.

“The New World” runs through Dec. 2, and tickets can be [purchased online](#).



Justin Guarini and Jillian Gottlieb. (Photo: Joan Marcus)



Ann Harada, Clyde and cast. (Photo: Joan Marcus)