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Was 'The New World' ever this flashy? (Bucks County Playhouse)



 Justin Guarini and Jillian Gottlieb get to know each other in "The New World." (Photo courtesy of Joan Marcus.)

By Howard Shapiro

A father fights with his daughter, a mother declares her disappointment with her son, everybody's armed with weapons and insults, and a turkey suddenly appears at the table — isn't that just like Thanksgiving?

Let's hope not. But that's the drill in the light-headed new musical "The New World," a world-premiere that Bucks County Playhouse opened this past weekend after nurturing the show for three years. "The New World" traces the journey of Pilgrims who land on Cape Cod in 1620 — Miles Standish and friends — and immediately run into Indians who, by the way, were there first. (Don't tell Miles.) It's a skewered history lesson, totally for fun, even with its underlying theme about having the guts to follow your heart despite the cultural-taboo warnings coming from your brain.

Right there, you know this can't be serious. No self-respecting Puritan would even go that route. One of them sings the New World ethic of their group: "If there's something new, something strange to do ... no one has to try it." Or, as Standish warns them: "We can't accept all things! We are not Methodists!"

All you good Methodists out there are saying, hmm, the Methodist Church wasn't founded 'til the next century. True, and Massachusetts did not become an idea until eight years after the show takes place, which stops no one from singing a song about how things get done in Massachusetts. But the very hip Indians (first hint: Broadway costumer Jen Caprio's stylish dresses) and the more stilted Puritans in "The New World" are channeling us in reverse: One Indian has a hideaway he calls a "man cave." Another speaks for no apparent reason in a Brooklyn accent. Or is it Boston? Hard to say.

The show's a little silly and sometimes just plain cute (mostly, the good meaning of that word). And I discovered somewhere in the first half that I was wearing a constant smile – I think it was when the wonderfully expressive Jennifer Perry, as a Pilgrim elder, chastised a younger Pilgrim with "all you care about is the size of a man's Bible, Patience!" I never stopped smiling until intermission and resumed when the six-piece orchestra broke into the entr'acte to begin Act Two. As pure entertainment, "The New World" works.

For a few minutes there, it might not have worked at all. Julius Thomas 3d, a cool-voice Broadway performer whose shows include "The Scottsboro Boys" and "Motown" was on the cusp of previews in the leading male role in "The New World" — Santuit, a guileless hunk of a Native American who falls hard for Miles Standish's daughter (the delightful Jillian Gottlieb). He was addled suddenly by a knee injury.

What to do? The Bucks County Playhouse producers called one of their board members – the amply talented actor/singer Justin Guarini, also a Broadway veteran, most recently in the musical "In Transit." He was on site quickly, learning his lines and the blocking by director Stafford Arima, the choreography by Lorin Latarro and the general goofy ambience of the show.

That feel is comfortably old-fashioned. The pleasant show-style tunes are by Gary Adler – he scored "Altar Boys." Phoebe Kreutz supplies the chipper lyrics. The show's book by L.F. Turner and Regina DeCicco is a straight narrative arc. No flashbacks. No labyrinths in the plot. The show's boy/girl

forbidden-love story follows the same pattern as “Romeo and Juliet” or “The Little Mermaid.” (And plenty others.) Yet when it’s done this nicely, it seems fresh.

The cast at Bucks County Playhouse is fully game, and boasts a slew of Broadway chops. Jennifer Perry, a belter playing the elder I mentioned above, has been in the Broadway hit “Kinky Boots” since it opened four years ago and took a leave to be part of “The New World.” Clyde Alves, with his light-the-night smile, plays a tap-dancing, fast moving Indian – he was one of three leads in Broadway’s “On the Town” revival. Eddie Cooper, a towering presence with a profoundly bass voice, plays Miles Standish here – he’s a regular in New York’s popular “Encores!” series of concert musicals. Ann Harada, another big belter who plays the Indian chief in “The New World,” appeared on Broadway in “Cinderella” and before that, “Avenue Q.”

And Tyler Maynard, from Broadway’s original “Mamma Mia!” and several Disney musicals, plays the role of a turkey. His performance marks the first time I saw anyone give a turkey something approaching depth.

The Big Apple influence continues on the design side. Everyone has worked on Broadway – scenery designer Anna Louizos, for instance, is a constant presence. Here, she creates workable sets on a turntable for both Indians and Puritans.

There’s an innocence to “The New World.” The characters cut through complexities and go directly to the core of their differences – again, in the style of traditional musicals. It’s also rich in laughs and songs, with a cast that’s good to look at. Sometimes, old-fashioned ideas just remain stylish.

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“The New World” runs through Dec. 2 at Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St. in New Hope. 215-862-2121 or buckscountyplayhouse.org.