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Theater: 'The New World' at Bucks County Playhouse

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Justin Guarini and Jillian Gottlieb in "The New World." (Courtesy photo)

By [Ted Otten](#)

For The Times of Trenton

New Hope's Bucks County Playhouse not only stages Broadway classics like "Guys and Dolls" and trendy crowd pleasers like "The Rocky Horror Show," but it has also hosted world premieres like "Cake Off" and "Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story." Now on stage through December 2 is "The New World," a brand new musical which the Playhouse has shepherded since it did a reading of the script during the show's earliest stages of development.

With a score by Gary Adler, lyrics by Phoebe Kreutz and a book by Regina DeCicco and L. F. Turner, it could be called a holiday musical since it includes the first Thanksgiving in

its story, but director Stafford Arima, who's making his BCP debut, doesn't think that label would be appropriate for a show which is about so much more.

"It's not trying to be history, but does use historical characters like Myles Standish, and it does take place in Massachusetts in 1620. It's a story about people coming together," said Arima, "and it's a comedy to remind us that coming together is a good thing. We may be different from each other, and we might not always agree, but if we sit down and connect, the world can become a better place for all of us. That's the message at the core of this show, and it seems especially appropriate now.

"In many ways, it pays homage to the traditional musicals of the '50s. The music is just so rapturous and diverse. There are fun tunes and emotional ballads, comic songs and serious songs, a real diversity. The script not only tickles the funny bone, but it warms the heart," said Arima who was faced with a serious problem during rehearsals which has been resolved happily.

The major character among the Native Americans encountered by the Pilgrims, who could be called America's first immigrants, is Santuit, and Julian Thomas III, who had been in Broadway's "The Scottsboro Boys," "Porgy and Bess," and "Motown, the Musical," was cast for that role. He was injured in rehearsal, not seriously but seriously enough to knock him out of the run. A desperate "the show must go on" call was put out to Justin Guarini who had performed several times at BCP including one of his bucket list roles, Bobby in Sondheim's "Company" in 2015.

Guarini, who had spent much of his youth in the Doylestown area and graduated from Central Bucks High School East before setting out on a career that has included Broadway, regional theatre, TV (coming in second in 2002 on the first year of "American Idol") and film credits, valiantly joined the cast a few days before the first preview and credits his success in the part to the cooperation of the rest of the cast, especially Jillian Gottlieb who plays Santuit's love interest Susanna Standish, daughter of Myles Standish, a brash, militaristic leader (played by Eddie Cooper) who heartily disapproves of those two young people falling in love.

"I had to do it because I have such a love for BCP and the fine work it does. Thankfully, I had Susanna to lead me around so that I'd be able to do what I had to do and be in the right place at the right time. This is a busy show, constantly in motion, and I'm part of both song and dance numbers that Lorin Latarro has choreographed so well. One of the best aspects of their love story is that they discover so much about themselves as they are getting to know each other," said Guarini who said that he didn't have a favorite song in the score because "that would be like saying which of your children you loved most." He did, however, mention that he enjoyed Santuit's buddy song, "Lone Wolf," with his friend Carl (Tyler Maynard) and Santuit's romantic duet with Susanna called "Natural" that explores not only their love but the nature of prejudice.

Guarini revealed that his character is the son of Hyannis (Ann Harada), tribal chief, who expects Santuit to fulfill his responsibilities to his tribe by marrying the daughter of the chief of a wealthy neighboring tribe from Connecticut in order to solidify their tribe's safety and prosperity, a duty explained in her powerful ballad called "Live My Dream." Falling in love with one of the Pilgrims is not to be tolerated. Like Standish and his negativity towards anything related to the Native Americans, Hyannis disapproves of her son's interest in one of the outsiders.

Some of the other characters lack historical parallels. History records that Standish was accompanied to the Plymouth Colony by his wife Rose, but there's no mention of his sister Joan, a role played by Jennifer Perry who took a leave of absence from her role as Trish in the current Broadway hit "Kinky Boots" to make her BCP debut as Susanna's Aunt Joan, a role she clearly relishes although she stated that her favorite role to date has been Rosie in "Mama Mia."

"I'll be going right back into 'Kinky Boots' when this run finishes," said Perry, "but I wanted to do this show because my best friend wrote the music, and he asked me to do it, so, since I have two understudies, my producers said a temporary leave of absence would be OK. I get to do this brand new piece, and it's always exciting to be the one who originates a role, plus I have two terrific songs, one in each act. The first is called 'Bright Side,' and the second is 'Indian Summer.'

"Joan comes to the New World with her brother and her niece," said Perry, "and she'd like to start a new life and become a different person from the one she was before she left England. She had been something of a loose woman, and so she needs to change her reputation. Joan has some wonderful scenes with her niece, and she says that she's buttoned up her collar and given up men. But that resolution is tested when she meets a character named Tago. I guess she just can't help herself when it comes to men."

IF YOU GO

"The New World"

Where: Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope, Pa.

When: Through December 2, Tuesday to Thursday at 7:30, Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m., with matinees at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

How Much: Tickets are \$40 to \$75; group rates for 10 or more are also available.

Contact: 215-862-2121.