

Glenda Frank in New York

New York theatre seasons usually begin slow and easy, rising sharply for the holiday and peaking in spring for the awards. My August line-up seemed ordinary: *Pretty Woman* at the Nederlander Theatre, a movie-musical. *Head over Heels*, a juke-box musical at the Hudson Theatre. *Days to Come*, an off-Broadway revival of a problematic play by Lillian Hellman. Only *Straight White Men* by downtown playwright Young Jean Lee at the Helen Hayes Theater, seemed to promise an adventure.

With songs by the Go-Gos; a book based on *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1580) by Sir Philip Sidney (originator Jeff Whitty of *Avenue Q* fame and adaptor James Magruder); and kids accompanying adults, I could only hope *Head over Heels* was more like *SpongeBob SquarePants* (twelve more Tony nominations) than *The Little Mermaid*. I hadn't factored in a creative team who had sharpened their teeth on challenging material. Director Michael Mayer, choreographer Spencer Liff, and lighting designer Kevin Adams are *Spring Awakening* (2006) veterans. Set designer Julian Crouch and costumer Arianne Phillips came from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. No wonder *Head over Heels* offered the genre a happy jolt into the twenty-first century.

The plot is a comic vehicle for subversion. The country of Arcadia is famous for its beat (*We've Got the Beat*), but there is unrest. King Basilius (a marvelous Jeremy Kushnier) consults the Delphic oracle (the transgender Peppermint, gorgeously arrayed) and immediately ignores the prophecy: he will lose his kingdom, will be cuckolded, and his daughters will marry unsuitable lovers. He lies to his sensible wife (the excellent Rachel York), but his viceroy (Tom Alan Robbins, wonderful!) keeps track of the omens. And sure enough the prophecies are fulfilled but in enigmatic Delphic fashion as the royals journey away from Arcadia to avoid misfortune (shades of *Oedipus Rex*). On their journey they meet the Amazon Cleophila, a disguised shepherd (Andrew Durand) who arouses everyone's interest. The conventional love triangle becomes interlocking polygons in all their classically comedic dimensions.

At times tongue-in-cheek, at times camp, at times silly or clever, *Head over Heels* relishes perverting conventions. The old rules fall by the wayside. Happiness is discovery. Revelation is recognition and acceptance, not merely LGBTQ but also colour-blind, class blind, and feminist. In a beautifully conceived shadow scene, husband and wife rekindle their passion, excited by the delusion that they are committing adultery with a hot young thing. Thanks to a trick of lighting, the shadows become multiple, the love extends. Projections by Andrew Lazarow (*The Terms of My Surrender*) are thrilling and chilling – especially the writhing snakes in the Delphic oracle's cave.

But *Arcadia* is all about the beat, the surprisingly ageless songs by the Go Go's, played in homage to the original all-female band (*If the beat dies out, the earth stands still*). The Go Go's began in the punk scene. *Beauty and the Beat*,

their 1981 debut album, was a first. It held the Number One Billboard slot for six weeks and went double platinum.

Tom Kitt's orchestration and arrangements are beyond impressive. A traditional-sounding ballad becomes a three-part harmony (*Good Girl*), a confession takes on double meaning as a duet (*Automatic Rainy Day*) and old favourites (*Heaven Is a Place on Earth* and *Our Lips Are Sealed*) add social defiance and gay pride to romantic lyrics.

The production boasts a quick pace and many outstanding performances. This is a young person's musical, a comedy that turns the world upside down. Critic Northrop Frye observed that comedy reunites the community through the once-forbidden union of the young lovers. The older generation and its values are replaced. *Head over Heels* is not for everyone. The people seated in front of me did not make it to Act II, but most of us exited the theatre happy – and humming.

I applaud any female playwright who gets her work produced, especially those who earn a Broadway staging. But I am not a fan of *Straight White Men* by Young Jean Lee. Before the performance we are treated to a sonic and visual assault (lighting effects on the tinsel curtain), and I don't know why. The play is plotted with barely any character development and lots of dancing (inventive choreography by Faye Driscoll). No, it is not a musical. As directed by Anna D. Shapiro (2008 Tony, Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle awards for *August: Osage County*), the roles of the father and his three sons are performance pieces. The family is celebrating Christmas; only, as in most family dramas, the celebration backfires and becomes something sad. The sons re-enact old routines, follow traditions like donning plaid pyjamas, refresh memories, and finally focus on the oldest son – who has made little out of his early promise as well as his Harvard and Stanford degrees. The frame, two LGBTQ performers (Kate Bornstein and Ty Defoe as Persons in Charge 1 and 2), may be a gloss on self-knowledge or privilege, but it seems tacked on.

I enjoyed *Pretty Woman the Musical*. The book is by Garry Marshall and J. F. Lawton, music and lyrics by Bryan Adams and Jim Vallance, direction and choreography by Jerry Mitchell. The original 1964 song by Roy Orbison sold seven million copies and was Number One for three weeks on the Billboard Hot 100. It spoke of longing, an almost existential loneliness, and a need for beauty. The 1990 film was a shocker, redefining the pretty woman as a prostitute – not Charles Baudelaire's *Eternal Female* – and the lover as a corporate raider. The casting of Julia Roberts and Richard Gere mellowed down the roles to showcase the Cinderella story, but the film retained a delicious edginess.

In an age of Stormy Daniels, there is a blandness to this musical. Casting is smart: Samantha Barks and the charismatic Andy Karl (Olivier and Drama Desk awards for *Groundhog Day*) as the leads, the feisty Orfeh (*Legally*

Blonde) as Vivian's best friend, and Eric Anderson (*Waitress*) as the sympathetic hotel concierge. So was offering (I would guess) a generous budget to the talented David Rockwell, sets; Gregg Barnes, costumes; Kenneth Posner and Philip S. Rosenberg, lighting. The penthouse, the costumes, the familiar scenes sliding into songs (*Something about Her, I Could Get Used to This, Welcome to Our World, I Can't Go Back*) are charming – as reassuring and luxurious as Vivian's bubble bath or her red gown.

The Mint Theatre under the direction of founder Jonathan Bank is a New York treasure, dusting off forgotten manuscripts and rediscovering lost authors for lovely productions in which beautifully detailed costumes and smart sets are a given. Lillian Hellman's *Days to Come* (Broadway debut 1936; it ran one week) is sometimes seen as a dry run for *Little Foxes*, her 1939 masterpiece. Both are about wealth, family, and ruthless hunger. *Days to Come* doesn't have a focus, so director J. R. Sullivan (2011 Drama Desk Award as Artistic Director of off-Broadway Pearl Theatre) allowed each thread its own colouring, avoiding thereby acting as auteur by choosing which conflicts to diminish.

The production is interesting. Most compelling is the tension between the labour organizer (an impressive Roderick Hill) who is trying to shepherd the striking workers to success and the factory owner's spoiled wife (Janie Brookshire) who amuses herself with travel and adultery. The hired protection (armed Pinkertons) look like movie thugs. Cora Rodman (Mary Bacon), the factory owner's sister, is an annoying version of the gentle Birdie from *Little Foxes*. The factory owner (Larry Bull) as a man bewildered by his choices is engaging in Act I. By Act II, when his weakness and indecision have provoked a death, the drama sputters.

But Hellman was clever and talented. There are golden moments. Harry Feiner, sets; Andrea Varga, costumes. (The play may have been spurred by H. G. Wells's 1899 novella *The Story of Days to Come*, in which a wealthy heiress in a dystopian world falls in love with a middle-class labourer).

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BROADWAY LISTINGS

Aladdin, New Amsterdam; *American Son*, Booth; *Anastasia*, Broadhurst; *The Band's Visit*, Ethel Barrymore; *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *Bernhardt/ Hamlet*, American Airlines; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *Carousel*, Imperial; *The Cher Show*, Neil Simon; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *Come from Away*, Schoenfeld; *Dear Evan Hansen*, The Music Box; *Ferryman*, Bernard B. Jacobs; *Frozen*, St. James; *Getting' the Band Back Together*, Belasco; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, Lyric; *Head over Heels*, Hudson; *Hello Dolly*, Shubert; Bernard B. Jacobs; *King Kong*, Broadway; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *The Lifespan of a Fact*, Studio 54; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *Mean Girls*, August Wilson; *My Fair Lady*, Vivian Beaumont; *The Nap*, Samuel J. Friedman; *Network*, Cort; *Once on this Island*, Circle in the Square; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *The Play that Goes Wrong*, Lyceum; *Pretty Woman the Musical*, Nederlander; *Prom*, Longacre; *School of Rock*, Winter Garden; *Springsteen on Broadway*, Walter Kerr; *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical*, Lunt-Fontanne; *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Shubert; *Torch Song*, Helen Hayes; *Waitress*, Brooks Atkinson; *The Waverly Gallery*, Golden; *Wicked*, Gershwin.

Top: Kate Bornstein and Ty Defoe in *Straight White Men*. Photo Joan Marcus.

Right: Andy Karl and Samantha Barks in *Pretty Woman the Musical*. Photo: Matthew Murphy.

Below: Taylor Iman Jones as Mopsa (centre) and the company in *Head over Heels*. Photo: Joan Marcus.

