

Berkshire Theatre Group, Stockbridge, MA

Songs for a New World, by Jason Robert Brown.

Directed and Choreographed by Gerry McIntyre. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

"A new world shattering the silence"

Jason Robert Brown is not a stranger to the Stockbridge campus of Berkshire Theatre Group. His first musical from 1995, "Songs for a New World," currently on stage at the Unicorn Theatre is the second of his shows to play in that southern Berkshire town. His third musical, "The Last Five Years," played on the main stage several years ago and, for my money, this show is just as good - or bad - as that previous presentation. Brown, best known for his Tony Award winning musical, "Parade," is a pop-rock composer whose lyrics tend to be too precious for their own good. His last musical show, "Bridges of Madison County," premiered at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in 2013 and moved to Broadway the following year. It was modestly successful.



Mia Munn, Michael Wordly, Dante Harrell, Nathe Rowbotham,
Alexandria J. Henderson; Photo: Emma K. Rothenberg-Ware.

The new world of the title is America, seen in 1492 and 1776 and also, between those dates, as observed in the 1990s. There are some fine moments in the score which is pretentious and overblown to the nth degree. The best song is from the 1776 sequence and assigned to "The Flag-maker" who sings of the stripes and stars she must create for the new American flag. It is beautifully sung in this production by Mia Munn

who moved the audience with the song's acute symbolism which works well in our current political situation. The cast of four (five really) is very talented, although, miked as they are, there are times when the lyrics do not come through clearly.

As in any musical there are standout numbers and this show has a few more of them. Munn also sings a comic song which director Gerry McIntyre has punctuated on every other word with hysterically difficult and intricate movement. It is called "Surabaya-Santa" and is, indeed, a Kurt Weill/Bertold Brecht parody about Mrs. Claus preparing for a divorce from her husband Nick who, every year in late December, leaves her with only elves for company. Munn is truly spectacular in this number, an honest star-maker of a song.

In a company with two women, one transgender singer and one man, he - Michael Wordly - has the highest singing voice. A lyric baritone with an incredible falsetto he thrills the audience with every song he sings. "The River Won't Flow," a complex song, is among his finest moments along with "Flying Home."

Nathe Rowbotham, the Transgender actress in the show, has many memorable moments including the only song to come out of this show and emerge a standard, "Stars and the Moon." Their credits indicate a preponderance of male roles in their Chicago theatre history and this show may mark Rowbotham's first transition appearance.

Singer Alexandria J. Henderson makes her mark with every song she sings including "She Cries," "Christmas Lullaby," and most especially, "I'm Not Afraid."



Michael Wordly;
Photo: Emma K. Rothenberg-Ware



Mia Munn; Photo: Jacey Rae Russell

Even so, the finest aspects of this show are the technical ones. Lighting and Projection Designer Shawn Edward Boyle provides the most creative design elements of the show while Shivanna Sooknanan's costumes grace the company most beautifully. Music Director/pianist Dante Harrell accompanies the cast and takes on two solo songs of his own (cast member 5) and his ensemble, Miriam Bolkosky on cello and Diego Mongue on drums, provide an elegant combination on stage. All together the company gives a good 78 minute performance of a minor, second-rate musical.

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Songs for a New World plays at the Unicorn Theare, 6 East Street, Stockbridge, MA through August 20. For information and tickets call 413-997-4444 or go to www.BerkshireTheatreGroup.org

