

Goodspeed Musicals, East Haddam, CT

Christmas in Connecticut, Book by Patrick Pacheco and Erik Forrest Jackson (based on a 1945 screenplay by Lionel Houser and Adele Comandín from a story by Aileen Hamilton), Lyrics by Amanda Yesnowitz, Music by Jason Howland. Choreographed by Marjorie Failoni. Directed by Amy Anders Corcoran. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.



The cast of Goodspeed's "Christmas in Connecticut"; Photo: Diane Sobolewski.

"Beauty, Bounty, and Blessings."

In the 1945 movie of the same name Barbara Stanwyck's columnist Elizabeth Lane pretends to be married to Reginald Gardiner's architect John Sloan to keep publisher Alexander

Yardley, played by Sidney Greenstreet, happy. but falls in love with war hero Jefferson Jones played by Dennis Morgan. It is complicated but highly amusing. In the new musical by a quartet of talented writers, Liz Lane, played by Audrey Cardwell, pretends to be married to farmer and union activist Victor Beecham (Matt Bogart), brother of her boss Dudley Beecham (Raymond J. Lee) for the same reasons but falls, instead, for the irascible Victor. Jones falls in love with Liz's fact-checker Gladys instead and there are happy endings all around. It's a clever transformation of film to stage and it should work. It will work.



Rashidra Scott and Josh Breckenridge:
Photo: Diane Sobolewski

But it needs work. At Goodspeed, the theater that developed “Annie,” and “Man of La Mancha,” working on new musicals is just one thing they do well. The other thing is producing shows that are must-see enjoyment. They bring to life shows that almost made it originally and shows that were outright hits. With this new musical, still being perfected, they have a potential hit on their hands though it suffers from a few minor problems.

To begin with the show is about an event at Christmas. Set then it may already limit its appeal to general audiences. Other hit musicals have used Christmas for songs and moments but this one is almost exclusively oriented to that holiday. The authors have opened it up a bit at the outset, borrowing from “Wonderful Town” (Why, oh why oh did she ever leave Ohio?) and our heroine here is new in New York, right out of Iowa (why, oh why-o-a), but the story is still the plot of the movie. And while many funny bits lead us in and out of some good songs, there is no real hit tune to be found in this show at this time. The score bounds about from very modern complex writing to very 1940's style music. It's all very good but you don't leave the theater humming that tune you just can't forget. I hope they find one soon and place it perfectly into the context of the show. It would make a world of difference.



Raymond J. Lee and Audrey Cardwell;
Photo by Diane Sobolewski



Audrey Cardwell and Matt Bogart;
Photo: Diane Sobolewski

The cast at Goodspeed is excellent. Audrey Cardwell is perfection as Liz. She is very attractive, sings beautifully with an edge in her voice that says “cynical Stanwyck.” And while cynical is terrific for this character there is still a need for the sentimental Stanwyck to touch us and it is clearly something she can do, but it takes that missing song to make it happen.

Her two-brother team of adversarial supporters are fascinating. Raymond J. Lee as Dudley epitomizes “I’ve Got a Secret” and the truth of the matter endears him to his overly negative sibling. Lee plays well with others and though he plays an important character he never hogs the stage, the moment or the relationships. Matt Bogart does his Spencer Tracy best playing a man with unstated dreams who finds romance difficult until he discovers a soul-mate he never thought he’d find. He gives Victor a genuine soul kept buried in a manly frame. When he releases it the character he plays becomes the most romantic figure you could imagine. Bogart does it so very well, too, so maybe that missing ballad/hit song could be his.

The other characters are so well defined by the artists portraying them. Rashidra Scott is a charming Gladys Higgenbottom, singing “Something’s Fishy” or just flirting with the war hero. Alexander Yardley, played by Melvin Tunstall III (replacing Ed Dixon) brought strength to a role that could be disagreeable. James Judy in the film’s S. Z. Sakal role of restaurateur Felix Bassenak shared, among other fine moments, a duet, “Blame it on the Old Magoo,” with Norah, played to comic perfection by Tina Stafford. Matthew Curriano gives new meaning to the phrase Cab-driver adding a certain sexual-romance to the second half. And, of course, Josh Breckenridge makes Jefferson Jones so very worthy of a song celebrating him and his name.

The production itself is one of Goodspeed’s best. Director Amy Anders Corcoran built a magical evening on a fine set designed by Lawrence E. Moten III. Herin Kaputkin clothed each and every character in just the right costumes. The show was lit, and at times unlit, very nicely by designer Rui Rita (who has been much missed at Williamstown) and Adam Souza conducted an excellent pit orchestra of eight players. The dances choreographed by Marjorie Failoni kept the sense of the mid-1940s alive in a very theatrical manner.

This is a show meant to be simply enjoyed. It still needs a few twists and turns to reach a perfect state, but it is a very enjoyable show right now, and, clearly, work is still being done to make it a total hit. Whenever you catch it you’ll be glad you did. It’s hard to ask for more than that.

+ 12/12/2022 +

Christmas in Connecticut plays at Goodspeed Musicals in East Haddam, Connecticut through December 30. For information and tickets go to goodspeed.org or call 860-873-8668.