

Barrington Stage Company, Pittsfield, MA

La Cage aux Folles, book by Harvey Fierstein, based on the play by Jean Poiret.

Music and Lyrics by Jerry Herman. Directed by Mike Donahue.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Because the best of times is now. . .”

Has there ever been a musical as special and groundbreaking as this one. . . I think not. It opened in 1983 after a lengthy gestation period involving playwright and director Arthur Laurents. The season’s other hits included the Tom Saqyer musical “Big River,” “My One and Only,” “The Tap Dance kid,” and revivals of “Porgy and Bess,” “Show Boat,” and “On Your Toes.” However, August brought in the first show to highlight the lives and loves of a very funny homosexuaal couple and their straight son. It’s chorus of showgirls further confused audiences, most of whom ultimately understood that there were both men and women portraying the girls. George Hearn, a deep baritone who had just played Sweeney Todd, took the central role of Albin who performs as ZaZa. All of this was new, alarming, charming and disarming. Now, forty-one years later it has the same effect on its audiences as it did in 1983: people love it!



Les Cagelles; Photo: Jeremy Daniel.

With or without acknowledged stars people love this show. Barrington Stage Company’s excellent production is no exception. Laughter, sobs, applause, embarrassed giggles, rhythm claps and sighs filled the air at the Boyd Quinson Stage during the opening performance. Polished performances graced the stage and beautiful music escaped the pit. Question: when was the last time you saw a show that began with a lovely woman, Angela Steiner, climbing out of the orchestra pit to play a solo on her accordion? I will bet the answer is “never before.”

Georges (originally played by Gene Barry), owner of the St. Tropez club where the show is set, is played here by Tom Story who delivers a respectable performance, breaking hearts with his two ballads, “Song on the Sand” and “Look Over There.” He plays the role in a solid fashion, not missing a beat yet not satisfactorily creating the character. It may take time to bring Georges as realistically as he needs to be to life and perhaps Story will get there soon.

Alex Michaels, however, as Albin grabs hold of the role and makes it very much his own from his first entrance to his final moments. This is a rarefied realization of the character. He is never self-aware, never clichéd, never subject to scrutiny as the very effeminate man who regards the world as his well-shucked oyster. Michaels gives the show its star and ranks in that rare heaven that houses the likes of Hearn, Gertrude Lawrence and Ethel Merman - unique talents whose equals cannot be found anywhere but on the living stage.



Alex Michaels, Tom Story; Photo: Jeremy Daniel.



Alex Michaels; Photo: Jeremy Daniel.

The glorious Elizabeth Parrish gave us the original Jacqueline, the role taken here by Tanesha Gary who sings her way into your heart when she duets with ZaZa in the second act hit song “The Best of Times,” a song so French it is hard to believe it was written by Jerry Herman. Gary is superb, making one wish she had a larger role.

As Jean-Michel, Georges’ son, Noah Wolfe does a fine job singing a reprise of “Look Over There” which brought me to sobs. Michele Ragusa as his future mother-in-law was a delightful surprise.

Philip Taratula plays the Butler/Maid Jacob nicely. The chorus “girls” are all wonderful, each one so different from the others that they become a regular overview of French humanity, singing, dancing and performing athletic feats of wonder throughout the show. This is nothing short of spectacular,

itself worth the price of the ticket.



Noah Wolfe, Sally Shaw, Don Noble, Alex Michaels, Tanesha Gary, Michele Ragusa, Tom Story;
Photo: Jeremy Daniel

Director Mike Donahue had an expert company of techies to work with and together they all deliver a perfect production. Alexander Woodward's set designs are wonderfully appropriate. The colorful costumes designed by Rodrigo Muñp and Benjamin Weigel a perfectly French Riviera in style. Philip S. Rosenberg lights the show in perfect Broadway fashion. The wigs, almost half the show by themselves, have been created by Bobbie Zlotnik.

This show hasn't aged at all, seeming just as fresh and pertinent as it was all those years ago. It is bound to be an audience favorite this season and it almost demands to be seen, in its semi-subtle French way.

+ 06/17/2024 +

La Cage aux Folles plays at the Boyd-Quinson Theatre in Pittsfield Massachusetts through July 6. For information and tickets call 413-236-8888 or info@barringtonstageco.org