

Proctors Theater, Schenectady New York
Parade, Book by Alfred Uhry. Music and Lyrics by Jason Robert Brown,
Directed by Michael Arden. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“And you don’t know this mn.”

Prejudice runs rampant in Alfred Uhry and Jason Robert Brown’s superb musical, *Parade*, now on stage at Proctors Theater in Schenectady, New York. Based on the facts of a 1913 murder in the National Pencil Factory in Atlanta, Georgia, racism clearly plays a major role in the trial of Jewish-American supervisor Leo Max Frank (born in Texas, raised in Brooklyn, educated at Cornell University). Accused of murdering day-worker Mary Phagan and probably raping her as well, Frank’s Jewish background played a major role in his persecution and prosecution, outstripping the suspicion of a Negro-Black janitor who was also arrested in this case. Frank was recently wed to Lucille Selig from a prominent Jewish family in Atlanta and after her first reluctance to support him in this case became his most ardent booster. The murder trial and its aftermath inspired the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915.

No photographs of this production supplied.

The musical is almost operatic in its composition format, opening with a solemn chorus celebrating the state of Georgia and moving through duets, solos, ensembles and the punctuation of rhythms that celebrate the dance-forms of the period as well as the somber emotional text of the show’s messages. It’s melodies are accessible and as familiar as the show’s exploration of prejudice. The current cast bring beautiful voices to bear and the show’s glories rest with them even as the story takes apart the historical understanding of who these people were and what they believed and acted on in this pre-world war one era.

Leo and Lucille are played by Max Chernin and Talia Suskauer. They are a handsome couple and Suskauer has a special voice that she uses for the dramatic effect that defines Lucille Frank. Particularly in the second act when she sings her aria “Do It Alone” and the duet with Chernin, “This is Not Over Yet” her voice and her dramatic ability are riveting. Chernin is her vocal mate, although his character is calmer and more complacent and this limits his dramatic impact in their music.

Among the other stand-out performers are the entire cast. It is rare that such an ensemble of players make such an impact. Thirty major and minor roles are assumed by this cast and all of them, including three girls whose testimony ultimately proves to be contrived give this musical (an artificial form of truth) the reality that shakes the audience’s belief in what is real.

In terms of production values the excellent set designed by Dane Laffrey easily enables director Michael Arden to move his cast of characters around easily and gracefully. Heather Gilbert’s lighting design and Sven Ortel’s projections make the show a fascinating watch. The period costumes designed by Susan Hilferty and Mark Koss are perfect.

Choreography by Lauren Yalango-Grant & Christopher Cree Grant definitively define the period and are fun to watch. Michael Arden has given us a swell picture of the turn of the century southland, its prejudices and its pride.

This production only has two more days in Schenectady before it sets out on its national tour and I encourage musical theatre fans, historians, religion advocates and just about everyone else to get in their cars and see this while you can. It is one of those shows which should be produced every fifteen years so that new generations can both enjoy it and learn from it the awful truths about American failings.

+ 01/16/2025 +

Parade plays at Proctors Theatre in Schenectady, New York through January 17. Go on line to proctorscollaborative.org to order tickets.