

# New York, New York

**John Kander, Frank Ebb** music, lyrics  
**Lin-Manuel Miranda** additional lyrics  
**David Thompson, Sharon Washington** book  
**St James Theatre, New York** 24 March 2023 – ongoing  
 REVIEWED ON 22 APRIL 2023



A picture-postcard view of mid-20th-century NYC; Colton Ryan as Jimmy and Anna Uzele as Francine, and company; Uzele is charismatic in the Minnelli role

Start spreading the news. There's a new musical valentine to New York City, and Broadway, and it comes wrapped in a bow of songs by 96-year-old composing legend John Kander and his late lyricist partner, Fred Ebb. *New York, New York* is only glancingly connected to the 1977 Martin Scorsese movie famed for introducing the title song that became an anthem for the Big Apple. Instead, co-writers David Thompson and Sharon Washington have filled out the film's wisp of a story with a metropolis-sized ensemble of subplots and supporting characters, all strivers of some sort in the post-World War Two city that never sleeps.

The wider narrative focus is a boon for director-choreographer Susan Stroman, who consistently delights with her inventive group numbers (a tap routine on the girders of a skyscraper under construction!) and interstitial scenes that make city residents more than just background players. We see a series of mini-dramas, like the opera-singing office sweeper who's overheard by some suits and soon finds herself belting on a grand opera stage.

The heart of the story is an updated version of Scorsese's post-*Taxi Driver* flop, starring Robert De Niro as an insufferably arrogant and abusive saxophonist and his rocky romance with a higher-flying singer played by Liza Minnelli. Anna Uzele, with a powerhouse voice and onstage charisma to match, injects additional nuance into the Minnelli role as a Black singer named Francine who faces extra obstacles in building a showbiz career in the 1940s.

Colton Ryan (*Girl From the North Country*) delivers a sui generis performance as Jimmy Doyle. He takes a slightly exaggerated approach – from offbeat line readings to bits of physical comedy like deeper-than-expected bows – that accumulate to make a potentially

unlikable character more sympathetic, even endearing. Ryan also sings like a 1940s-style crooner, with a slightly nasal delivery, a studied nonchalance and a tendency to over-enunciate. His vocal approach can be mesmerising, particularly on the almost-whispered solo 'Quiet Thing' (a rejected number from 1965's *Flora the Red Menace* that becomes an unusual showstopper in the hands of Ryan and sound designer Kai Harada).

“Susan Stroman consistently delights with her inventive group numbers and scenes”

The show includes other trunk songs, along with a few Kander wrote with Ebb before the latter's death in 2004. But most of the score is comprised of brand-new Kander compositions, some with a lyrical assist from Lin-Manuel Miranda. The *Hamilton* creator deploys his distinctive wordplay on numbers such as

the up-tempo opener 'Cheering For Me Now', as well as slower tunes like 'Better Than Before', a ballad of longing from a violin-teaching mother to her still-MIA soldier son, delivered with real poignance by Emily Skinner (in an underwritten role).

After a season full of stripped-down productions, it's a joy to see over-the-top costumes (by Donna Zakowska) and sets (by Beowulf Boritt) that capture a picture-postcard view of mid-20th-century New York. Besides the re-creation of neon signs, subway stations and wrought-iron fire escapes, the onstage tableaux emerge in clever ways: a woman's round luggage

becomes the clock at the centre of Grand Central Station, while doormen's wintertime shovels are lifted to create a stone bridge in Central Park where Jimmy and Francine steal a kiss.

Still, there are a lot of characters introduced in this three-hour production – many of whom fail to develop much beyond their Central Casting-ready types. (One exception: the energetic Angela Sigala as a Cuban percussionist who finds a place in Jimmy's band while challenging his machismo-obsessed father.) Unlike Jimmy, Uzele's Francine is deprived of both a backstory and sidekicks of her own – unless you count a deep-pocketed theatrical producer (Ben Davis, in a thankless role) whose patronage comes with strings that lead straight to his bedroom.

Despite the infelicities, somehow it all works. Stroman delivers a pulsing movement within scenes and between them, propelling the story forward to a coup de théâtre finale that reveals she has yet another trick up her sleeve. In the face of such showmanship, those little town blues can't help but melt away.

Thom Geier

## Production credits

**Cast** Colton Ryan, Anna Uzele, Clyde Alves, John Clay III, Janet Dacal, Ben Davis, Oliver Prose, Angel Sigala, Emily Skinner et al

**Direction, choreography** Susan Stroman

**Music direction** Alvin Hough Jr

**Orchestrations** Daryl Waters, Sam Davis

**Set** Beowulf Boritt

**Lighting** Ken Billington

**Sound** Kai Harada

**Costumes** Donna Zakowska

**Hair, wigs** Sabana Majeed

**Projections** Christopher Ash, Beowulf Boritt