

# Back to the Future

**Bob Gale** book **Alan Silvestri, Glen Ballard** music, lyrics  
**Winter Garden Theatre, New York** 30 June 2023 – ongoing  
 REVIEWED ON 28 JULY 2023

**US  
LIVE  
SHOWS**



Marty McFly (Casey Likes, centre and right) is aided in his time-travelling by scientist Doc Brown (Roger Bart, left), and, of course, that legendary DeLorean (centre)

The best screen-to-stage musicals have fallen into two categories: shows based on old classics (*Sunset Boulevard*) or obscure indies (*The Band's Visit*), where the story is less familiar to most audiences; and shows sprung from recent hits (*The Lion King*) that find fresh ways to adapt the material for a brand-new medium – ideally making song a central element of the storytelling. Lately, though, many movie-based musicals seem less like creative endeavours than brand extensions.

*Back to the Future*, arriving on Broadway after an Olivier-winning London debut, delivers a glossy but hollow show with a mostly forgettable score by Alan Silvestri and Glen Ballard (who co-wrote the music for the 2011 clunker *Ghost: The Musical*). Yes, the tunes include 1950s classics like 'Earth Angel' and 'Johnny B Goode' as well as the 1980s anthem 'The Power of Love' from the film's soundtrack. But the new songs are mostly serviceable pastiches of '50s pop, occasionally spiked with a refreshing 21st-century sensibility that rhymes 'malarkey' with 'patriarchy'.

There are some nods to the musical format. Roger Bart (*The Producers*), who ratchets up Doc Brown's mad-scientist eccentricity, observes that a chorus of showgirls appears whenever he breaks into song. Why he's singing, though, remains a puzzle. And Casey Likes, a survivor of Broadway's *Almost Famous* musical, boasts an appealing voice and a youthful energy as the teenage time-traveller Marty McFly – yet he's mostly slack-jawed during the first act, as stumped as we are by the muddled version of a character made famous by Michael J Fox.

Other leads – such as Hugh Coles as Marty's wimpy dad, Liana Hunt as his flirty mom, and Nathaniel Hackmann as the one-dimensional

bully Biff – seem content with reducing their roles to sitcommy cartoons.

One trouble is that there's a bigger time gap between now and the 1985 film than there was between the 1985 setting and the 1955 timeframe where Marty thrusts himself

“In the jaw-dropping second-act climax, the DeLorean defies all laws of physics”

into a love triangle with his high school-age parents – a concept that seemed skeezy even at the time. One Gen X friend told me that when he recently showed the film to his kids, they were completely confused because pre-smartphone 1985 seemed just as dated as the '50s era. Even the future-set *Back to the Future 2* took place in... 2015.

Instead of reworking the material to allow a present-day Marty to head back to the '80s, book writer Bob Gale slavishly cribs from

his original screenplay (with director Robert Zemeckis, a co-creator here), making only modest updates. (Mercifully, the film's Middle Eastern terrorists have been jettisoned.) While one '50s number extols the virtues of cigarettes and leaded gas, you wish that the show would better exploit the discrepancies between then and now. Chris Bailey's choreography, another exercise in period pastiche, is also a missed opportunity.

Where director John Rando succeeds, and succeeds spectacularly, is in both pacing and stagecraft. Seldom has a Broadway show looked and felt more like a film. Tim Hatley's eye-popping sets shift seamlessly from Doc Brown's crowded workshop to a vintage pastel-tinted diner to the clocktower where Brown struggles to erect a lightning-capturing contraption in the nick of time. Hatley's costumes lean heavily on the film's signature looks, with nods to the bobby-sock-era '50s and the colour-blocked '80s for the chorus.

But the show's big star is the time-travelling DeLorean, which zips suddenly onstage and then, coupled with Finn Ross's video design and Chris Fisher's illusions, appears to race along small-town streets at engine-revving speeds. In the jaw-dropping second-act climax, the car defies all apparent laws of physics (and gravity) by hovering over the front rows of the stalls.

But do theatre audiences really want to see a live-action film recreated on stage, even one that blows bubbles into the auditorium during the '50s high school dance? In the end, Marty and Doc Brown are just no match for the technical wizardry on display all around them. And you won't exit the theatre humming the purr of a DeLorean engine.

Thom Geier

## Production credits

**Cast** Roger Bart, Casey Likes, Hugh Coles, Nathaniel Hackmann, Liana Hunt, Jelani Remy *et al*

**Direction** John Rando

**Choreography** Chris Bailey

**Music direction** Ted Arthur

**Music supervision** Nick Finlow

**Orchestrations** Ethan Popp, Bryan Crook

**Set, costumes** Tim Hatley

**Lighting** Tim Lutkin, Hugh Vanstone

**Sound** Gareth Owen

**Video** Finn Ross

**Illusions** Chris Fisher

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman