

# The Great Gatsby

**Jason Howland** music **Nathan Tysen** lyrics **Kait Kerrigan** book  
**Paper Mill Playhouse, Millburn, New Jersey** 12 October – 12 November 2023

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**US  
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Noah J Ricketts, John Zdrojeski, Eva Noblezada and Samantha Pauly raise a glass; Sara Chase as Myrtle (centre); Jeremy Jordan belts out his songs in the title role

What is it about Broadway creators and the Jazz Age? Two decades ago, composers Michael John LaChiusa and Andrew Lipa produced duelling musicals based on the same 1928 source, Joseph Moncure March's poem *The Wild Party*, which ran almost simultaneously on and Off Broadway (respectively). Neither generated much heat (though the LaChiusa version did nab seven Tony nominations).

Now another Jazz Age classic, F Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, has sparked a pair of musical adaptations vying for a Broadway berth. Next summer, Pulitzer Prize winner Martyna Majok will debut her adaptation – titled *Gatsby* – with a score by pop star Florence Welch and Oscar nominee Thomas Bartlett at Boston's American Repertory Theater. But first, New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse premieres a competing version from composer Jason Howland and lyricist Nathan Tysen, the songwriting team behind the recent Broadway flop *Paradise Square*.

Like that period piece, the score boasts fully orchestrated tunes that are polished, professional but mostly derivative and not particularly jazzy. (Still, there is some wit in lyrics that rhyme 'glasses' and 'molasses'.) It's also terrifically sung by a cast led by Jeremy Jordan as Gatsby (belting the last notes of his opening ballad in an almost direct callback to his 'Santa Fe' from *Newsies*); Eva Noblezada as Daisy Buchanan and Noah J Ricketts as the book's genial narrator Nick Carraway.

The ambitions are clear from the eye-popping set and cinematic projections (by Paul Tate dePoo III) featuring lush art deco nods to Baz Luhrmann's 2013 film. The concert-ready lighting by Cory Pattak and the over-the-top

flapper-era costumes (by Linda Cho) sometimes scream Vegas more than period speakeasy. The show looks like a couple million bucks, with a fortune spent on two onstage automobiles alone, and some energetic group dance numbers (choreographed by Dominique Kelley) that have an appealing showmanship. Director Marc Bruni delivers the kind of high-gloss,

schoolboy who literally bumps into drinks carts trying to maintain his poise around his erstwhile crush, Daisy, who married the well-to-do Yale Tom Buchanan (John Zdrojeski) after Gatsby shipped off to World War One. This *Gatsby* is such a simp that his attempts to seem cool, to brush off Tom as an 'old sport,' become the most obvious of poses. Worse, Kerrigan has shoehorned in a romantic B couple out of Fitzgerald's most notorious proto-queer characters, Nick and Jordan Baker (played by Samantha Pauly), a professional golfer and admitted 'confirmed

bachelor' who mysteriously hooks up with the bookish naïf Nick because, apparently, that's how musicals are meant to be structured. Paul Whitty and Sara Chase, meanwhile, make the most of their underwritten roles as George and Myrtle Wilson, the working-class couple undone by the shenanigans of the Buchanans and Gatsby.

What's so great about this *Gatsby*? He has no mystique, no sense of menace, so the reveal about his background is anticlimactic. Even his mobbed-up business partner, Meyer Wolfsheim (Stanley W Mathis), describes him as a dispensable pretty boy. Daisy doesn't fare any better, with the silky voiced Noblezada stuck with an 11 o'clock ballad describing herself as a 'beautiful little fool' (a line that Fitzgerald's character used ironically, not literally).

What we get is a Jazz Age-set romantic thriller that resembles the Fitzgerald book only if you squint really hard. Others will need the assistance of Doctor TJ Eckleburg, the eye doctor whose billboard looms over the Wilsons' gas station. At least the sign looks spectacular.

Thom Geier

“From eye-popping sets to the cinematic projections, the show's ambitions are clear”

new-money production that *Gatsby* might have built for himself on Long Island's North Shore.

But there's a huge crack in the foundation – and it comes in Kait Kerrigan's book, which has turned Fitzgerald's classic into a mushy melodrama with characters twisted beyond all recognition. *Gatsby*, that most enigmatic of American antiheroes, here becomes a lovesick

## Production credits

**Cast** Jeremy Jordan, Eva Noblezada, Sara Chase, Stanley W Mathis, Samantha Pauly, Noah J Ricketts, Paul Whitty, John Zdrojeski *et al*

**Direction** Marc Bruni

**Music direction** Daniel Edmonds

**Music supervision, orchestrations** Jason Howland

**Choreography** Dominique Kelley

**Set, projection design** Paul Tate dePoo III

**Lighting** Cory Pattak

**Sound** Brian Ronan

**Costumes** Linda Cho

**Hair, wigs** Charles G LaPointe, Rachael Geier