

Gutenberg! The Musical!

Scott Brown, Anthony King music, lyrics, book
James Earl Jones Theatre, NYC 15 Sep 2023 – 28 Jan 2024
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The next Matthew Broderick and Nathan Lane? Andrew Rannells and Josh Gad become a lovable odd couple in a dizzyingly fast-paced bio-musical pastiche

Musical Theatre has long embraced the meta, and shows about making musicals or spoofing the genre have become a staple on Broadway, from *[title of show]* to *Something Rotten* to *A Strange Loop* to *Spamalot* (which has just spawned a major Broadway revival). The pleasure of these productions arises from embracing the elements of the format – *Spamalot* features a tune called ‘The Song That Goes Like This’ – while simultaneously holding them up for inspection (and ridicule).

The latest in the genre is *Gutenberg! The Musical!*, a jokey two-man showpiece which has debuted on Broadway more than 15 years after a mid-2000s run Off Broadway. The show has been structured as a semi-staged reading by two New Jersey funeral home employees and lifelong musical geeks who seek the backing of actual Broadway producers for their dream project, a heavily fictionalised bio-musical about printing-press inventor Johannes Gutenberg.

Why Gutenberg? Well, Bud and Doug reason that he produced the first book and ‘If your new musical isn’t already a movie or a book or a fairy tale told from the lady’s point of view, people will not sell their cars to see it’. It also helps that Gutenberg’s sparse Wikipedia entry gives the duo a ton of creative license to make up their own plot, which involves a cartoonishly evil monk and a love interest named Helvetica because, well, everybody has a type.

Scott Brown and Anthony King, who wrote the book and score and originally performed the show in the cramped basement theatre of the Upright Citizens Brigade back in the day, have jammed about as many

punchlines into a two-hour show as humanly possible. Here, the material is immeasurably boosted by the savvy casting of the hopeful but hapless heroes: Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells.

The duo, who first broke out in 2011 as the Tony-nominated leads of *The Book of Mormon*, may not (yet) have the box office clout of Matthew Broderick and Nathan Lane, but just wait. They play off each other with a rapport

arm and leg movements of kindergarteners in a school pageant. Rannells is the taller, more conventionally handsome Abbott to Gad’s shorter, schlubbier Costello. And while neither can be easily pegged as the straight man here, they complement each other in enthusiasm and naivety. Each deploys multiple accents to represent the ever-growing cast of *Gutenberg!*, which they further represent by

donning baseball caps ID’d with the names of each character – setting up some hilariously whirlwind scenes of slamming-door farce that take place entirely on their foreheads.

They’re a well-matched vocal team as well, Rannells’s appealing baritone contrasting with Gad’s ability to deploy a well-honed head voice and impressive riffs at the end of phrases. They each have highlights delivering a pastiche-heavy score that fits the material without elevating it very high. The best musical moments are meta, as when our heroes point out how elements of an Act Two song call back to an earlier tune (‘A motif is when you use the same music over and over again – but it’s not lazy,’ Doug explains).

Director Alex Timbers keeps Gad and Rannells at a sprinter’s pace throughout, with the laughs flying by at a dizzying clip.

He also holds a few surprises up his proverbial sleeve, including a second-act reveal on the deceptively simple set that helps justify ticket prices. (You may also see a star like Cynthia Erivo or Nathan Lane himself pop up for a walk-on bit as the sought-after Broadway producer.) Is there a more unlikely hit than *Gutenberg!*? You’d be hard-pressed to find one.

Thom Geier

“Director Alex Timbers keeps Gad and Rannells at a sprinter’s pace throughout”

that is deceptively casual while still lightning-quick. (‘Interesting choice, Bud,’ Rannells ad-libbed at my performance after Gad caught him off-guard with a bizarrely stressed delivery of the word *history*.)

The stars embrace their characters’ deliberately amateurish qualities, crossing each other on stage with the exaggerated

Production credits

Cast Josh Gad, Andrew Rannells

Direction Alex Timbers

Music direction Marco Pagnia

Music supervision, orchestrations TO Sterrett

Movement Nancy Renee Braun

Set Scott Pask

Lighting Jeff Croiter

Sound ML Dagg, Cody Spencer

Costumes Emily Rebholz

Hair Tommy Kurzman

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