

Harmony

Barry Manilow music **Bruce Sussman** lyrics, book
Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York 18 October 2023 – ongoing
 REVIEWED ON 9 NOVEMBER 2023



Poignant: Julie Benko and Sierra Boggess as Ruth and Mary; Broadway veteran Chip Zien's memory-sharing Rabbi; Allison Semmes's real-life singer Josephine Baker

Barry Manilow, who broke out in the 1970s with pop hits like 'Mandy' and 'Copacabana' that boasted both infectious melodies and strong narratives, seems to be tailor-made for Broadway. The 80-year-old star's first stage musical is not a jukebox mashup but an original composition that also unearths a deadly serious, largely forgotten true story: the Comedian Harmonists, a six-member, all-male German singing group which rose to international fame in the 1930s – until the Nazi regime could no longer tolerate their diverse musical tastes, irreverent performance style and, most importantly, three Jewish members.

It's a remarkable yarn, one that book writer and lyricist Bruce Sussman awkwardly presents as a memory play from the decades-later perspective of the last surviving member, a former Polish rabbinical student played by the indomitable Broadway veteran Chip Zien (the Baker in the original production of Sondheim and Lapine's *Into the Woods*). We get broad sketches of the six singers, as well as two of their romantic partners – Young Rabbi's level-headed shiksa future wife Mary (Sierra Boggess), and Ruth (Julie Benko), a placard-hoisting Jewish revolutionary type who falls for the group's pianist, an overly optimistic Christian dubbed 'Chopin' (played with soulful indecision by Blake Roman).

The first act crams in a lot of somewhat pedestrian exposition, leading up to a fateful concert at New York City's Carnegie Hall in 1933 where the group considers an offer to remain in the States for a lucrative gig from NBC. They decline, setting the stage for a much darker second act where both the music and the tone of the show reflect how Hitler's tightening grip on power impacts our

heroes. While the first act featured a soufflé-light slapstick number called 'How Can I Serve You Madam?' involving crotch-covering silver trays, seltzer spray bottles and farce-worthy choreography, the second act's bitterly ironic 'Come to the Fatherland!' depicts the singers as literal puppets of the Nazi regime, with bright red bands of fabric from the ceiling restricting

by Linda Cho and Ricky Lurie to great effect. But he's less secure as a director of the book scenes, where the seams in the narrative show most clearly. Sussman gives in to the temptation of heightened melodrama, elevating a scene in which the Harmonists encounter Hitler on a train into a woulda-coulda-shoulda moment of regret that feels wildly implausible.

(Were these singers going to stab the Führer with a pitch pipe and end the war?) In the show's climactic musical moment, Zien delivers a powerful *cri de coeur* solo to rival 'Rose's

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their every move. Recalling a certain NSYNC video, the Harmonists seem to be saying 'bye bye bye' to their hosts.

Director-choreographer Warren Carlyle succeeds in these ensemble numbers, using Beowulf Boritt's reflective black lacquer box of a set, Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer's concert-style lighting and the period costumes

Turn' about his supposed missed opportunity. It's simultaneously moving and unconvincing, weighed down by some of Sussman's clunkiest lyrics ('Why?! Why?! Adonai!').

You can see why this project has been in development for more than two decades – and why the creators have struggled to wrestle the many characters, the dramatic shifts in tone and the sheer weight of the history into a coherent production. The highlights of Manilow's score are the ballads, particularly an Act One declaration of love by Danny Kornfeld's Young Rabbi called 'Every Single Day' and a charming (and beautifully sung) duet by Boggess and Benko, 'Where You Go,' that seems to borrow its melodic line from a prelude by Chopin (the composer, not the character). And there's an added poignancy to a story about the very real dangers of antisemitism arriving at this particular moment. It's said that history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. And *Harmony* offers a timely opportunity to delve into those rhymes and embrace both their beauty and their horror.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Chip Zien, Sierra Boggess, Sean Bell, Julie Benko, Danny Kornfeld, Zal Owen, Eric Peters, Blake Roman, Steven Telsey, Allison Semmes, Andrew O'Shanick *et al*
Direction, choreography Warren Carlyle
Music direction John O'Neill
Music arrangements Barry Manilow, John O'Neill
Orchestrations Doug Walter
Set Beowulf Boritt
Lighting Jules Fisher, Peggy Eisenhauer
Sound Dan Moses Schreier
Costumes Linda Cho, Ricky Lurie
Hair, wigs Tom Watson