

Water for Elephants & The Outsiders

Water for Elephants

PigPen Theatre Co. music, lyrics
Rick Elice book

Imperial Theatre, New York 24 February 2024 – ongoing
REVIEWED ON 20 MARCH 2024



The Outsiders

Jonathan Clay, Zach Chance, Justin Levine music, lyrics
Adam Rapp, Justin Levine book

Bernard B Jacobs Theatre, New York 16 March 2024 – ongoing
REVIEWED ON 5 APRIL 2024



Big top: Paul Alexander Nolan brings a showman's flair to ringmaster August (left, centre with Grant Gustin); Isabelle McCalla as Marlena with Gustin as Jacob

Broadway has been littered with stage musical adaptations of classic novels and movies but there are innate challenges in adapting familiar stories to a new medium. The creators of *Water for Elephants* and *The Outsiders* both ground their scores in the country-folk tradition of American roots music, to varying degrees of success, and find innovative ways to capture the visceral nature of their stories.

For *Water for Elephants*, that means leaning into the milieu of a Depression-era circus with the promise of Cirque du Soleil-style acrobatics (designed by Cirque vet Shana Carroll) and a deliberately dishevelled puppet menagerie. Director Jessica Stone has nailed a stripped-down let's-put-on-a-show aesthetic for the production's look, her creative team producing an overall storybook effect. The circus train is suggested by simple scaffolding, for instance, and the train wheels are barrels that double as rolling platforms for gymnastic dance routines choreographed by Jesse Robb and Shana Carroll.

The simplistic love story, based on Sara Gruen's bestselling 2006 novel and a limp 2011 movie starring a miscast Reese Witherspoon and Robert Pattinson, becomes a sideshow to production numbers featuring a chorus of rope-walkers, tumblers and aerialists who throw each other around the stage. Those bigger numbers with the full company making full use of the stage (and the space above it) really shine here. Still, there are some quieter moments that also stand out for their visual artistry – as when aerialist Antoine Boissereau, playing an ailing horse who had long been the top act, ascends above the stage via a long strip of fabric and then spins and writhes in an agonising depiction of the beast's death throes.

But when we leave the Big Top, the central love story's conventionality surfaces. Grant

Gustin, a *Glee* alum who starred in TV's *The Flash*, brings a gangly, aw-shucks charm to Jacob, a veterinary-school dropout who joins the struggling circus and falls for equestrian star Marlena (Isabelle McCalla, a plucky ingenue with a pretty voice) – who's married to owner and ringmaster, August (Paul Alexander Nolan).

“With the conjuring of a bygone circus in all its sepia-toned glory, misgivings fade away”

Nolan is a natural performer with a booming tenor voice, and he brings both an enticing showman's flair to the circus routines and a glowering malevolence to the love-triangle storyline. (Christoph Waltz, a natural onscreen baddie, played the role in the movie.) But

book writer Rick Elice doesn't know quite how villainous to make the onstage August. Unlike in the book (and movie), Nolan's August actually hands Jacob the gun to euthanise that foundering horse – which deprives the story of a justifiable conflict between the two men (aside from Jacob's growing romantic attraction to Marlena). But since Marlena's a married woman destined to be with our blandly appealing hero, August is soon whipping his newly acquired elephant, assaulting his wife and taking his jealousy to murderous extremes.

The supporting players emerge as more distinctive, including Broadway vet Gregg Edelman as an older Jacob who hovers about the action in an awkward framing device, Joe De Paul as a clown who wrenches genuine laughs out of well-trod material, and Sara Gettelfinger as a cooch dancer turned den mother who cautions Jacob about romancing the boss's wife ('yer a balloon in a room full of pins').

The gently rootsy score sometimes matches the energy and cleverness of the spectacle-focused production numbers, as in a witty ode to circus deception, 'The Lion Has Got No Teeth', which recalls classic Kander and Ebb. But too many key dramatic songs feel like they've been written by committee – in this case, the seven-member PigPen Theatre Co. collective – with all of the personality and sharp edges sandpapered down to a blandly smooth finish. That's particularly true of the pleasing, but forgettable, ballads for the romantic leads which lack a poetic flourish to soar as singles or a specificity to deepen our understanding of either the characters or their plights. But when the characters step into that

Production credits – Water for Elephants

Cast Grant Gustin, Isabelle McCalla, Gregg Edelman, Paul Alexander Nolan, Stan Brown, Joe De Paul *et al*
Direction Jessica Stone

Choreography Jesse Robb, Shana Carroll

Music direction Elizabeth Doran

Music supervision, arrangements Mary-Mitchell Campbell, Benedict Braxton-Smith

Orchestrations Daryl Waters, August Eriksmoen, Benedict Braxton-Smith

Set Takeshi Kata

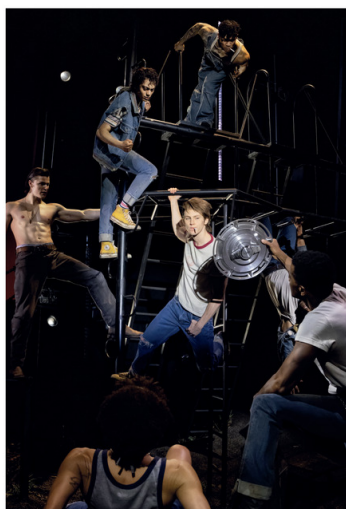
Lighting Bradley King

Costumes David Israel Reynoso

Projections David Bengali

Circus, puppet design Shana Carroll/Ray Wetmore & JR Goodman, Camille Labarre

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy



Standout score: Emma Pittman (Cherry) with Brody Grant, shouldering much of the show's success as Ponyboy; the cast breathes life into showstopping set-pieces

ring, and Stone conjures a bygone circus in all its sepia-toned glory, all our misgivings fade away like so many popcorn crumbs.

The Outsiders boasts its own showstopping set-pieces, but it stands out with a score, by Jonathan Clay and Zach Chance of the indie folk duo Jamestown Revival along with Justin Levine, that truly understands how to use songs to tell a story onstage. The infectiously jangly opening number, 'Tulsa '67', succeeds in ways that few modern Musical Theatre songs do: setting the scene in a particular time and place, introducing a broad range of characters in sharp detail and establishing the major themes of alienation and potential violence soon to be fleshed out. All in an irresistible tune featuring a plaintive melody, haunting harmonies, a syncopated hook and then a delayed foot-stomping chorus.

SE Hinton's first novel reads a bit like *West Side Story* fan fiction in its depiction of teenage 'greaser' outcasts in 1960s Oklahoma who spar with the snooty, better-off socs (pronounced 'soash', short for 'socials'). The tensions escalate when a sensitive greaser bookworm named Ponyboy Curtis (Brody Grant) forges a literary connection with preppy prom queen Cherry Valance (Emma Pittman, making the most of an underwritten role) – incensing her brutish soc boyfriend, Bob (Kevin William Paul).

It's a simple young adult-ish wisp of a story – the socs remain one-dimensional villains. But the adaptation, by acclaimed playwright Adam Rapp with Levine, manages to update the story (and improve on Francis Ford Coppola's 1983 film) in canny ways. Ponyboy's go-to book is no longer *Gone With the Wind* but the more thematically apt *Great Expectations* – yielding a soaring and melodic 'I wish' song that encapsulates all of the character's yearnings for a better life. As Ponyboy explains, the

Dickens yarn is about 'this orphan kid named Pip who falls in love with a rich girl. And there's this pretty tough outlaw character who takes him under his wing'. That tough outlaw, an outwardly gruff ex-jailbird named Dallas (Joshua Boone), also meets a fate that's less problematic and politically charged c2024.

“The show sparkles not just as an adaptation but as a genuinely great American musical”

Rapp's biggest improvement may be the fleshing out of Ponyboy's older brother Darrel, who's dropped out of school after an auto accident killed their parents and now struggles to keep Ponyboy and middle son Sodapop (Jason Schmidt) fed, clothed and out of

trouble – even as Ponyboy and his pal Johnny (Sky Lakota-Lynch) go on the lam after a street fight turns deadly. Brent Comer brings anguish to the role and his smooth but searing baritone elevates some of the most effective story-songs.

Despite his reservations, even Darrel is drawn into the climactic Act Two rumble – which

director Danya Taymor stages in an electrifying, rain-drenched scene that showcases Rick and Jeff Kuperman's muscular choreography and Brian MacDevitt's striking

lighting design. Taymor also deploys a simple, stylised set that seamlessly transforms a drive-in theatre into a barn or an abandoned church. Moreover, the stagecraft helps to disguise some of the plot weaknesses, particularly in Act Two.

Much of the show's success rests on the slender shoulders of Brody Grant, a Broadway newbie who is onstage nearly the entire show as Ponyboy. Though he looks older than his 14-year-old character (even older than C Thomas Howell did in Coppola's movie), he conveys the restlessness and confusion of a young not-quite man trapped in a dilemma that has spiralled far out of his control. Grant's earnest, expressive face and soaring tenor connects you to the character and his journey from the opening number.

The Outsiders sparkles not just as an adaptation but a genuinely great American musical. The songs feel like organic engines driving a tragic story of class conflict and brotherly love to onstage moments with real heft. Plus, they boast a country-inflected energy and lyrics that match the plainspoken poetry of Robert Frost, another all-American writer that Ponyboy memorably namechecks. Who says that nothing gold can stay?

Thom Geier

Production credits – The Outsiders

Cast Brody Grant, Sky Lakota-Lynch, Joshua Boone, Brent Comer, Jason Schmidt, Emma Pittman, Daryl Tofa, Kevin William Paul, Dan Berry *et al*

Direction Danya Taymor

Choreography Rick Kuperman, Jeff Kuperman

Music direction Matt Hinkley

Orchestrations Justin Levine, Matt Hinkley

Arrangements Justin Levine

Set AMP featuring Tatiana Kahvegian

Lighting Brian MacDevitt

Sound Cody Spencer

Costumes Sarafina Bush

Hair, wigs Alberto Alvarado

Projections Hana S Kim

Special effects Jeremy Chernick, Lillis Meeh