

Hell's Kitchen

Alicia Keys music, lyrics **Kristoffer Diaz** book

The Public Theater, New York 24 October 2023 – 14 January 2024

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Chris Lee and Maleah Joi Moon, who gives a star-making performance; Shoshana Bean and Brandon Victor Dixon; Camille A Brown's propulsive choreography

Based on the early life and song catalogue of Alicia Keys, *Hell's Kitchen* is a heaven-sent new musical that seems destined for a long and successful run on Broadway (it transfers in the spring) and beyond. Keys has written a handful of new plot-driven songs for the 1990s-set show, particularly in the first act, which sets up the story of 17-year-old Ali (newcomer Maleah Joi Moon), living with her harried single mother (Shoshana Bean) in a high-rise apartment building on 42nd Street at the southern edge of Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen neighbourhood.

Moon delivers a star-making performance as the restless young artist-in-waiting, while Bean rivals her onstage daughter in belts and vocal runs even as she struggles to hold down two jobs. Mainly, she just wants to prevent her hormone-frenzied daughter from making the same mistakes as she did – including an early pregnancy by Ali's dad, her first love, a talented musician and perpetual no-show played with squirrely charisma by Brandon Victor Dixon.

Ali falls hard for Knuck (Chris Lee), an older hunk she meets as he practises bucket-drumming with his pals on the sidewalk outside her building. While his street music draws the ire of Ali's mother as well as the building's doorman (Chad Carstarphen) and the Rudy Giuliani-era New York Police Department, he's actually a softie who holds down a working-class job, attends church on Sundays and rightly retreats when he learns that Ali has been lying about her age. Ali also experiences the joys of another blossoming romance: with piano, the instrument that will launch her career. Kecia Lewis offers an alternative maternal figure as her keyboard mentor, drumming home lessons in musical tradition as well as racial injustice with earth-

mother gravitas. She brings a commanding authority and gospel-tinged alto to the #BlackLivesMatter anthem 'Perfect Way to Die' that proves a powerful Act One closer.

Kristoffer Diaz has crafted a thin wisp of a book from Keys's relatively uneventful, PG-13 spurt of teenage rebellion – and the bumpy second act sometimes veers into melodrama. But director Michael Greif fills the gaps with

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music, movement, boundless energy and good will. Robert Brill's Meccano-like scenic design, coupled with Peter Nigrini's projections and Natasha Katz's lighting, evoke a '90s-era New York City that's alive with possibilities. Dede Ayite's costumes, full of colour-blocked

tops and loose baggy jeans, are a throwback to the urban styles of the era. They help set up an 'Empire State of Mind' finale that's truer to Keys's original rendition (the one not featuring Jay-Z), and which seamlessly functions as an 11 o'clock showstopper.

Camille A Brown's pulsing and propulsive choreography, a mix of unison ensemble routines as well as individual kicks and flexes, accentuates Keys's syncopated beats in a way that's pure theatre. Greif and Brown occasionally go overboard with the dance elements, as loose-limbed ensemble members

mysteriously pop up in the background during solo and duet numbers where they have no natural reason to appear. But the overall effect is to underscore the kinetic energy of city life, marked by both unified crowd flow and creative bursts of individuality.

What sets *Hell's Kitchen* apart from other recent jukebox musicals is that it doesn't sound like Broadway — in the best possible way. Rather than adapting Keys's hits into *Glee*-ified Musical Theatre arrangements, the show roots its radio-friendly score in its own aesthetic mix of pop, R&B, hip-hop and even jazz. Bean and Dixon disrupt the usual rhythms and time signatures of 'Fallin'' to give the familiar tune an off-kilter feel that would be right at home at the Blue Note Jazz Club. (Credit for the arrangements goes to Keys and Adam Blackstone, who also did the orchestrations with Tom Kitt.) It looks and sounds like now, or at least like the very recent past, kicking Musical Theatre into bold, new directions. And ones that put talented women in the warm glow of the spotlight centre stage.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Maleah Joi Moon, Shoshana Bean, Kecia Lewis, Brandon Victor Dixon, Chris Lee, Chad Carstarphen, Vanessa Ferguson, Jackie Leon *et al*

Direction Michael Greif

Music supervision Adam Blackstone

Orchestrations Adam Blackstone, Tom Kitt

Arrangements Adam Blackstone, Alicia Keys

Choreography Camille A Brown

Set Robert Brill

Lighting Natasha Katz

Sound Gareth Owen

Costumes Dede Ayite

Hair, wigs Mia Neal

Projections Peter Nigrini