

Spamalot

John Du Prez, Eric Idle music **Eric Idle** lyrics, book
St James Theatre, New York 31 October 2023 – ongoing
 REVIEWED ON 11 NOVEMBER 2023



Ethan Slater as the narrator; Leslie Rodriguez Kritzer as The Lady of the Lake; James Monroe Iglehart as a stolid Arthur (right), with Christopher Fitzgerald as Patsy

It's been nearly two decades since Eric Idle debuted his stage musical version of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, a combination of Python silliness and Broadway spoofing that nabbed the Tony Award for Best Musical in 2005 and made a star out of Sara Ramirez. Now the show is back on Broadway, in a revival that has the second-generation feel of a regional theatre production that's somehow made it to the big time. (Director-choreographer Josh Rhodes's serviceable production was first mounted last summer at Washington, DC's Kennedy Center.) Paul Tate dePoo III's low-rent set and projection design relies on decidedly two-dimensional flats and animation that looks cruder than what Terry Gilliam produced for Python's famously low-budget films.

The original Broadway cast picked up five Tony nominations: in addition to Ramirez, who won the Tony as featured actress, there was Tim Curry as Arthur, Hank Azaria as Lancelot (and a bunch of John Cleese's secondary characters), Christopher Sieber as Galahad and the late Michael McGrath as Arthur's coconut-banging riding companion, Patsy.

It's telling that the new production boasts fewer standouts among the cast. Leslie Rodriguez Kritzer is having a blast belting out her numbers as The Lady of the Lake, adding riffs, runs and verbal nods to everything from Elphaba in *Wicked* to shamelessly over-the-top *American Idol* contestants. And Ethan Slater, who was a wide-eyed delight leading *SpongeBob SquarePants* several seasons ago, busts out some hilarious physical comedy in quick-changing roles from the sober narrator to the fey and foppish Prince Herbert.

James Monroe Iglehart proves a stolid Arthur, with Christopher Fitzgerald as his

reliable foil Patsy. But Nik Walker makes virtually no impression as the gallant knight Galahad, while Michael Urie (*Ugly Betty*) as the reluctant crusader Sir Robin and *Saturday Night Live* alum Taran Killam as Lancelot and the lead Knight of Ni seem ill at ease with the 'veddy' British, Pythonian approach to

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comedy. They each flash moments of hilarity, from Urie's second-act showstopper 'You Won't Succeed on Broadway' to Killam's ad-libbed raspberries as a snooty Frenchman who farts in the general direction of Arthur's crusaders. But the casualness of the Python approach to comedy seems to elude them: the effort shows.

Still, this *Spamalot* offers some chuckles – both callbacks to the absurdism of the 1975 film

as well as inspired nods to the new theatrical medium that lends a modicum of narrative structure that the movie utterly lacks. (The highlights are Broadway-skewering numbers like 'The Song That Goes Like This,' complete with old-school choreography, that send up the genre even as they honour it.)

And Idle's script has been updated with references to TikTok, the weight-loss drug Ozempic, and even Taylor Swift paramour Travis Kelce that help to balance some

of the more groan-inducing chestnuts littered throughout. Many of the jokes are nearly a half-century old, of course, which may offer comfort to theatregoers who will nod in recognition or even lip-sync along to familiar punchlines ('I ain't dead yet') and tunes ('Always Look on the Bright Side of Life,' which naturally gets a curtain-call reprise). But some of the bits just don't land anymore, at least in this production, as when a knight stubbornly continues jousting after losing one limb after another.

Even the Musical Theatre references lean toward old standbys like *Les Misérables*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Man of La Mancha* that all seem rather musty in 2023. While the original Broadway production felt inspired, a burst of fresh musical comedy air that both traded on nostalgia while offering something new, this revival too often feels like it's going through the motions. Knights say 'Ni!'; rabbits turn carnivorous, cows fall from the ramparts and our heroes eventually find their Grail (the fulfilment of a first-act 'I want' song that no longer seems original). That's just what happens, because this is the show that goes like this.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Christopher Fitzgerald, James Monroe Iglehart, Taran Killam, Leslie Rodriguez Kritzer, Ethan Slater, Jimmy Smagula, Michael Urie, Nik Walker *et al*

Direction, choreography Josh Rhodes

Music direction, supervision John Bell

Orchestrations Larry Hochman

Arrangements Glen Kelly, John Bell

Set design Paul Tate dePoo III

Lighting Cory Pattak

Sound Kai Harada, Haley Parcher

Costumes Jen Caprio

Hair, wigs Tom Watson