

Forbidden Broadway: Merrily We Stole a Song

Various music **Gerard Alessandrini** lyrics

Theater555, Off Broadway 30 August 2024 – 5 January 2025

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Nicole Vanessa Ortiz, Danny Hayward and Chris Collins-Pisano lampoon *The Great Gatsby*; *Gypsy*, *Cabaret*, *Suffes* and *Back to the Future* are all pastiched



After over four decades of needling Broadway, the Musical Theatre spoof *Forbidden Broadway* was poised to make its Broadway debut this year with a new production, subtitled *Merrily We Stole a Song*. At the last minute, weak ticket sales and stiff Main Stem competition relegated the new edition to a considerably smaller Off-Broadway venue. Thank goodness. While Tony-winning creator Gerard Alessandrini's revue retains its rapier edge, the proudly unpolished production lends itself better to a less-centrally located space like Theater555 that's so far down 42nd Street it's practically in the Hudson River.

In fact, one of the show's virtues is its low-rent approach to the increasingly pricey entertainments mounted in modern Broadway theatres. Consider Alessandrini's swipe at the London-imported revival of *Cabaret*. Danny Hayward dons a red wig, a conical birthday-party hat, an orange and white polka-dot ascot and yellow rubber kitchen gloves to replicate Eddie Redmayne's signature look as the outré Emcee. (Dustin Cross designed the wittily on-point costumes.) Hayward also nails Redmayne's bizarre diction as he sings to the tune of 'Wilkommen': 'I'm Eddie Redmayne and I have no charm; I will repulse you; sniff my underarm – and lick it!'

Soon, the chameleonic Jenny Lee Stern joins the takedown with a vicious imitation of Gale Rankin and her critically hammered (but nevertheless Tony-nominated) interpretation of

Sally Bowles: 'What good is playing this role the ol' way? Liza was just OK! Come see my dark deranged display... when I murder *Cabaret*!'

“Gerard Alessandrini's insider-y lyrics are the real star and they remain caustic fun”

Stern, a veteran of past *Forbidden Broadway* shows, is as gifted a singer as she is a mimic. She seamlessly morphs from a heavily nasal, bosom-forward Bernadette Peters ('Cause sexy is my gimmick, even though I'm 76') to full-on diva Patti LuPone ('My vocal style will thrill you all, when I let out a zinger; I'll sink to that') to one of Henry VIII's short-lived wives from

SIX ('You'll pray that you'll be beheaded like Anne Boleyn'). Plus, she's surprisingly limber – look out for those splits! – in the intermittent dance numbers (listlessly choreographed by

Gerry McIntyre with far too many jazz-hands clichés).

Chris Collins-Pisano, another *Forbidden Broadway* alumnus, shows a similar flair for impressions, nailing

everybody from newly minted *Merrily We Roll Along* Tony winner Daniel Radcliffe to the manic Roger Bart in *Back to the Future* to Cole Escola as Mrs Abraham Lincoln in the new non-musical smash *Oh, Mary!* ('Attend the tale of Mary Todd, I'm very funny but very odd').

Not every joke lands, of course, and those with only a passing knowledge of recent Broadway hits and misses may scratch their heads at times. But you need not have seen the Max Martin jukebox musical *Juliet* to understand the routine riffing on Katy Perry's 'Roar' from that show. In a song aptly retitled 'Sore', gifted vocalist Nicole Vanessa Ortiz stands in for any number of current female Broadway leads asked to belt out heavily modulated tunes featuring one glass-shattering high note after another: 'You hear my voice, you hear that sound? No, it's not an injured basset hound.'

Ortiz also delivers a finely sung preview of Audra McDonald's 'Rose's Turn' from *Gypsy* with a withering assessment of the storied

Production credits

Cast Chris Collins-Pisano, Danny Hayward, Nicole Vanessa Ortiz, Jenny Lee Stern

Direction Gerard Alessandrini

Choreography Gerry McIntyre

Music direction Fred Barton

Set Glenn Bassett

Lighting Joan Racho-Jansen

Sound Andy Evan Cohen

Costumes Dustin Cross

Hair, wigs Ian Joseph

PHOTOGRAPHY: CAROL ROSEGG



Below left Collins-Pisano's Mary Todd **Above right** Jenny Lee Stern and Hayward as Rankin and Redmayne



predecessors as Mama Rose: 'Merman was too loud, Patti was too proud, Bernadette was meek, Rozzie Russell weak; Tyne was under pitch, Staunton was a bitch; Midler was too brash, Betty Buckley trash; Angie was alright but she was polite.' The nicknamed references to Tyne Daly, Patti LuPone and Angela Lansbury fly by so quickly that even habitués of online theatre message boards may miss them.

And that's both the virtue and pitfall of *Forbidden Broadway*. After more than a dozen updates over the years, the show continues to embrace its status as a no-thrills send-up of the mega-budgeted blockbusters (and flops) produced just a few streets away. Glenn Bassett's beyond-basic set design looks cheap, the stuff of high-school theatre, even with the addition of projections. But it's Alessandrini's insider-y lyrics that are the real star here, and they remain caustic fun.

Credit also goes to musical director Fred Barton, who accompanies the cast on the piano and provides the fluid vocal arrangements.

Thom Geier
★★★★☆

Your guide to...

Forbidden Broadway

Everything you need to know, at a glance

Origins Conceived by Gerald Alessandrini, *Forbidden Broadway* was first performed on 15 January 1982 at Palsos's Supper Club.

International *Forbidden Broadway* has toured the US extensively and been seen internationally. The show was performed in London at the Menier Chocolate Factory in 2009 and at the Vaudeville Theatre in 2014.

Albums There have been 14 *Forbidden Broadway* albums to date, most recently 'Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation' (2020).

Awards In 2006, the show and Alessandrini received the Tony Honors for Excellence in Theatre, and it has won three Drama Desk Awards for Outstanding Revue (2001, 2005 and 2008).

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