

Gypsy

Jule Styne music **Stephen Sondheim** lyrics **Arthur Laurents** book
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US
LIVE
SHOWS



Jordan Tyson is a standout as June, portraying a Kristin Chenoweth-like girlishness in her routines; Joy Woods as wallflower Louise with her overbearing mother

It's Audra's turn. It was probably only a matter of time before Audra McDonald – the 'winningest' actress in Tony Awards history (and the only one to win in all four acting categories, for musicals and plays) – took on that Holy Grail of American Musical Theatre: Mama Rose. Like *King Lear*, which seems to hook every male actor of a certain age, the anti-heroine of the musical classic *Gypsy* offers daunting but irresistible challenges both vocally and dramatically for an actress who's outgrown her ingenue era.

McDonald offers a mesmerisingly original take on the mother of all stage mothers. While the actress wields a certain needling charm, especially when trying to ingratiate herself with any man who might book her daughters onto a vaudeville stage, her Rose is perhaps the most monstrous version of the character that I've seen. (Imelda Staunton's 2015 version in London comes a close second.) She ceases seeing her children as offspring and more as instruments for her own ambition, a sensation that becomes clear during the Act One closer 'Everything's Coming Up Roses.' Her favoured daughter June (Jordan Tyson) has eloped and left her, and she quickly shifts her aspirational attention to the shy, less-talented Louise (Joy Woods) – but instead of addressing her long-overlooked child, she smothers Louise in an embrace and projects her own vision

outward, to the audience beyond. So single-minded is her focus that she barely even notices her new star-in-the-making.

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McDonald doesn't look like other Roses, and she doesn't sound like them either. Her soprano leans more toward operatic vibrato than traditional Musical Theatre belting, an approach that brings a somewhat tremulous

quality to her solos. The effect is to soften a character whose every utterance comes with a braying sense of neediness. It all builds to a showstopping 'Rose's Turn' before the final curtain that ends with McDonald curtsying to an appreciative crowd that only she can see. It's another fascinating choice, one that's in keeping with McDonald's unrelenting ferocity.

Not that this is a one-woman show by any means. Arthur Laurents's book, and the infectious score by Jule Styne and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, generously showcases a deep bench of supporting players. And many shine here. Tony winner Danny Burstein effectively conveys the ardour of Herbie, Rose's doormat of a boyfriend/manager. Tyson is a standout as June, smartly shifting from a Kristin Chenoweth-like girlishness in her no-holds-barred onstage routines to a more jaded striving behind the scenes. (Marley Lianne Gomes, who shares the role of Baby June with Jade Smith, is a pint-size scene-stealer in the early numbers.) And Lesli Margherita is a hoot as the brash-talking but 'demure' stripper Tessie.

Joy Woods, who made a memorable impression in last season's *The Notebook*, seems as lost as her little pet lamb playing the wallflower-turned-burlesque star Louise.

Production credits

Cast Audra McDonald, Joy Woods, Danny Burstein, Jordan Tyson, Kevin Csolak, Lesli Margherita, Lili Thomas, Mylinda Hull, Jacob Ming-Trent *et al*
Direction George C Wolfe
Music supervision, direction Andy Einhorn
Choreography Camille A Brown
Set Santo Loquasto
Lighting Jules Fisher, Peggy Eisenhauer
Sound Scott Lehrer
Costumes Toni-Leslie James
Hair, wigs Mia Neal
Make-up Michael Clifton

PHOTOGRAPHY: JULIETA CERVANTES



Below Louise, transformed into a burlesque star **Above** Audra McDonald gives a powerful performance as Rose



One problem is the listless staging of her strip numbers by director George C Wolfe and choreographer Camille A Brown – routines that should spotlight her dramatic transition instead fall as flat as a tossed-off pasty. (Other dance moments, including the strippers' hilarious 'You Gotta Get a Gimmick,' are stronger.) Santo Loquasto's set design is a curious hodgepodge, splurging on some elements (a working Model T for a single quick scene on the road) while skimping on others (the bulb-filled 'ROSE' sign during the finale is shorter than McDonald).

Wolfe mostly sidesteps the racial dimension of casting Black actresses as Rose and her daughters. While one of *Gypsy* Rose Lee's routines nods to early 20th-century dancer/singer Josephine Baker (particularly in Toni-Leslie James's costume designs), the added obstacles that might face this particular Rose in Depression-era America are left mostly to subtext. That's probably for the best. One reason *Gypsy* has endured for so long is that it depicts an idea that has become even more universal since the show's 1959 premiere: an unquenchable hunger for fame, even second-hand. McDonald captures the essence of that yearning in a performance so powerful that we don't dare look away.

Thomas Geier

★★★★☆

Your guide to...

Gypsy

Everything you need to know, at a glance

True story The show is based on the 1957 memoir of Gypsy Rose Lee (born Rose Louise Hovick). It follows her early vaudeville career and the relentless ambition of her mother, Rose Thompson Hovick, in the 1920s and '30s.

Rose's Turn The roof-raising finale was constructed by Sondheim from fragments of songs heard throughout the show when the initial plan to have a dream ballet fell through at the last minute.

Star vehicle The role of Rose was written for Ethel Merman. Since then legends of the stage, such as Angela Lansbury, Bernadette Peters, Bette Midler, Patti LuPone and Imelda Staunton, have taken on the now-iconic role.