



MONDAY, OCTOBER 07, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: A Bright Future In Reach For "Chasing Rainbows"

**CHASING RAINBOWS: THE ROAD TO OZ** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**PAPER MILL PLAYHOUSE**

*Newsies. A Bronx Tale. The Bandstand. Honeymoon In Vegas.* Paper Mill Playhouse is a powerhouse when it comes to launching new musicals to Broadway. So naturally, the world premiere of a show about Judy Garland's journey from vaudeville to a starring role in MGM's *The Wizard Of Oz* raises one big question. Is *Chasing Rainbows* ready for Broadway? Absolutely.

They've got a great cast, make smart use of classic tunes, deliver some rousing choreography, tell a good story and -- most of all -- have a star in the making. Ruby Rakos acts sweetly, dances winningly and then sings with a voice that immediately relaxes anyone worried about some kid measuring up to one of the great entertainers of all time. Can she belt 'em out like Garland? You bet. It's easy to picture the amiable, entertaining, family friendly *Chasing Rainbows* on Broadway as is. Rakos could be reliving Garland's first triumphs on the Great White Way just as Renee Zellweger is in movie theaters depicting Garland's last triumphs in the bio-pic *Judy*.

So the yellow brick road is tantalizingly in view. But if *Chasing Rainbows* wants to *succeed* on Broadway, they've got work to do.

The story begins right at the climax, with Judy Garland, the small town girl with a big voice finally putting on the red shoes of Dorothy Gale. She's about to tackle the lead role in a movie based on the Harry Potter of its day, one of the best-selling books of all time. And Judy is the star! Not just Mickey Rooney's sidekick, not just a co-star, but the honest-to-goodness star. How did she get here?

The show immediately jumps back to a black-and-white childhood, thanks to sepia-toned sets and photo-backdrops that paint the



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THEATER: "Terra Firma" Is On Shaky Ground

monotone world Garland grew up in as Frances Gumm. Her family are entertainers, complete with a stage mother of a mom, a cheerleader of a dad and three sisters who can sing and dance with the best of 'em. But Frances is the star and everyone knows it. They're leaving their hometown and excited by the prospect of California. So it barely registers on little Frances that some of the local men are glowering at her dad. The Gumm's are choosing to leave, but it's clearly under a cloud as dad's awkwardly emotional goodbye to another man hints at problems to come.

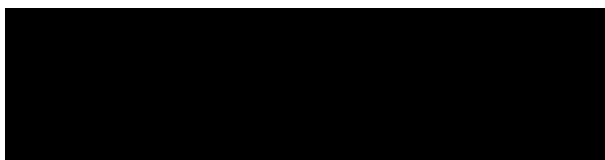
*Chasing Rainbows* captures the travails of an "ordinary" girl next door striving to become a star in the movies. (It helps to be one of the most talented people on the planet.) But it also lasers in on the deep love between Frances and her dad Frank (Max Von Essen). As with so many men in her life, Frank is gay, causing tension in the family and creating one of many roadblocks on the way to Oz.

So the Gumm's jump in their car and head to...well, not Hollywood, but a town just a few hours from Hollywood where Frank bought a theater/movie palace as a base of operations. That's close enough for Frances!

Before you know it, she's closer and closer to stardom. Despite being told a hundred times by every man and woman in sight that she's no looker, too fat, an ugly duckling, plain, boring, etc., Frances somehow ends up at MGM. She befriends a swell, gawky young guy at the studio school for budding talent and he turns into Mickey Rooney. After a road trip to the World's Fair to work the crowds, a few radio slots and some canny support from studio head Louis B. Mayer's secretary, Frances Gumm soon turns into Judy Garland.

But she's still not a star, not even close. With the future bombshell Lana Turner and budding sensation Deanna Durbin as classmates, is it any wonder Judy starts to believe she'll never make it? (In real life, Elizabeth Taylor was also a classmate, enough to make anyone else in the world feel dumpy.) Dad's her biggest fan, but he's stuck in that town a few hours away, drawn into yet another doomed and forbidden romance. Mom is quietly dating as well. Her sisters long for a real life. And Mickey Rooney seems to be hitting on every woman in Hollywood *except* Judy. Maybe she doesn't even want to date him herself. But it sure would be nice to say no.

And just when her dream project of *The Wizard of Oz* is announced as an upcoming MGM movie, they also announce its star: Shirley Temple. Judy is heartbroken. Again. We know she's going to sing "Over The Rainbow" by the end of the night, but how exactly will she get there?



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Recap the complicated plot of this smoothly performed show and you realize how much ground they cover. A family's travails, the studio system and the chaotic production history of *The Wizard Of Oz* are all deftly interwoven, but that's just the start. A closeted dad, a growing dependency on pills to battle weight, a young woman's desire for a little romance and a starlet's yearning for the spotlight are also in the mix, along with Mickey Rooney, Roger Edens (an MGM talent who also championed Judy) and Louis B. Mayer, here showing an inability to realize what a gem he's got. They casually toss in more: the profitable and corny Andy Hardy series of movies, the way a studio party could help launch a career and Mayer's sharper-than-sharp secretary/right hand woman Kay Koverman are all convincingly brought to life.

And did we mention this is a musical? A few serviceable new numbers pop up for specific scenes, especially early on. But mostly the show cannily works in classic fare, including "Bill" from the musical *Show Boat*, old warhorses like "All God's Chillun Got Rhythm" and Garland signature numbers like "Zing! Went The Strings Of My Heart," "Dear Mister Gable," and of course "Over The Rainbow."

The book by Marc Acito weaves them in nicely, along with hints of other songs from *The Wizard of Oz*. Full credit to David Libby, who adapts the music into all sorts of new situations and provides additional music as well. The entire show was conceived by Tina Marie Casamento, who also delivers some additional lyrics. Normally I'd beware of someone's passion project, but she poured her heart and years of her life into this and it paid off.

Director Denis Jones keeps the elaborate story moving swiftly from start to finish and also delivers some top-notch choreography. He peaks with three big numbers: a school house jam called "All Ma's Children;" a playful performance of "Swing, Mister Mendelssohn," in which Mickey and Judy struggle to teach the operatic Deanna Durbin how to play with the beat on a number; and a tap-dancing finale that wows.

The lighting by Japhy Weideman is also key on that last number, adding nicely to the intensity of the moment. Throughout, the colorful and character-specific costumes of Linda Cho, the hard-working sets of Alexander Dodge and the other tech elements carry the story along

with them. One expects a Broadway-ready production from Paper Mill and it delivers here, including a 14 piece orchestra led by conductor Lawrence Yurman that sounds even bigger. And the cast is pretty much flawless.

Max Von Essen is endearing as Judy's loving, troubled dad and Lesli Margherita equally memorable as a mom who keeps her eye on the prize of stardom without ever letting us doubt she loves Judy just as much. Indeed, her role might easily have played as a heavy or faded into the background with so much emphasis placed on the bond between father and daughter, but Margherita's innate warmth shines through. Their relationship is complicated but never maudlin or tragic, no small feat.

Karen Mason scores with two plumb parts: a quick but vivid turn as the teacher in that studio school and as Mayer's very savvy secretary. Her big number lets Mason paint the picture of how some smart women navigated Hollywood: they pushed for what they believed in and left enough room for the men to believe it was their idea all along. Colin Hanlon is right there with her as Judy's other supporter Edens. A handsome fellow, he also endures Cho's one big misstep in costumes: maybe the grey slacks and red shirt and scarf he sports at one point is historically accurate, but it sure doesn't do him any favors. When Judy sports something unflattering, the show is making a point. Hanlon deserves to look more dashing.

Michael Wartella is goofily winning as Mickey Rooney. He drums with authority, dances with pleasure, sings with pep and utterly convinces as a rising young talent. It's a miracle Judy never points out the obvious: how come guys don't have to be matinee idols to be stars? And yet Wartella has the magnetism of a love interest both onscreen and off.

Stephen DeRosa is not too broad as studio head Louis B. Mayer, a mensch, if a little slow on the uptake. Violet Tinnirello does a wicked little spin on Shirley Temple. (Though I think Rooney's taunting of her in "This Is A Happy Little Ditty" should be tweaked to be more like friendly teasing than disgust.) And on and on the list goes, from Judy's two sisters (played by two sets of fine actresses) to Christina Maxwell as Deanna. She too might have over-played this operatic teen star as the butt of jokes. Instead, director Jones ensures everyone is playing a real person instead of a punchline.

Above all, there's Ruby Rakos as Judy Garland. She's poked and prodded and overlooked by the studio system. She sings and dances and then sings again, all in numbers made famous by one of the biggest talents we've ever seen. And you never doubt for a second she's turning into that powerhouse star. Sure, the voice can belt out, but Rakos also captures little things like the "cascading" style Judy often used and the focus on lyrics that made her much more than a little girl with a big voice. Her character is indeed "In Between" (a song Judy

sang in one of her Mickey Rooney movies, bemoaning the fact that she's not a little kid but not yet a woman either). Here, Judy is on her way to stardom, but still Daddy's little girl. Rakos embodies that without ever making Judy too babyish or too mature.

So what's wrong? What needs fixing? Not a lot in terms of the basic bones of the show, but plenty needs tightening and cutting throughout. First, the very name of the show reveals a lack of confidence. Call it *Chasing Rainbows*, not *Chasing Rainbows: The Road To Oz*. That subtitle makes it sound educational, just one step away from calling it *Chasing Rainbows: The Road To Oz -- The Story Of Judy Garland and How She Came to Star in The Most Beloved Musical Of All Time*. If your audience isn't already aware of what *Chasing Rainbows* is about, adding in *The Road To Oz* won't make any difference.

The framing device is also unnecessary. The show begins with Judy putting on the ruby red shoes of Dorothy and hinting at the Big Song in the finale. It's redundant. Again, your audience knows where it's headed: the entire show is about her getting the lead in *The Wizard Of Oz*. So don't waste their time by telling the audience the one thing they already know: she gets the part. Indeed, Judy's childhood is a more compelling start since that's precisely what most people aren't familiar with. Plus, too many songs and bits of dialogue throughout make reference to rainbows and showers and the like. A little bit of that goes a long way.

The Shirley Temple bit is funny and allows a good joke when it comes to the casting of *Wizard*. But her character is unnecessary in a show which has so much going on. Yes, the "This Is A Happy Little Ditty" number works on its own, but it doesn't really move the story forward. We know Judy isn't a cute little moppet without needing an entire number to prove it.

Further, the second act leans too often on details about the making of *The Wizard Of Oz*. Sure, it's fun to run through all the script changes that were added, dropped, added in again and then finally dropped. But it's not necessary to the real story, which is about Judy's coming of age as an artist, not rewrites. Do we really need to be told Buddy Ebsen fell ill due to his Tin Man makeup and had to be rushed to the hospital? Not when you can read entire books sharing the same info about that and cut musical numbers like "The Jitterbug" and other trivia.

So much info is stuffed into the second act, they lost track of Mickey Rooney for a while. Just like the real Judy and Mickey, Rakos and Wartella spark each other every time they're on stage. While Roger Edens also has a role to play, that part feels too big when we're wondering where the heck Mickey has gone too. They're too good together.

A big montage towards the climax depicts all the swirling issues bedeviling Judy. It's tricky, ambitious and convincingly done. But it too is unnecessary. The montage merely recaps the drama we've already seen. A climactic confrontation between Judy and one of the movie's directors is all the drama we need to build to a big finish.

That big finish was teased at the beginning of course...and it's not successful.

Judy is singing "Over The Rainbow" but she's also trying to convince Mayer to keep the song in the movie. So she keeps stopping to explain how good it is, telling us the song is both happy and sad at the same time and why it's crucial to the film. But we know that! The monologue states the obvious *and* keeps Judy from delivering this classic number in full. She sings and then stops to tell us how terrific it is and then starts and stops again, utterly frustrating the one moment we've expected all along: a beautiful version of a classic song, performed by a great talent. Show, don't tell.

Besides, if she's going to convince Mayer how great the number is, what better way than to just perform it? Sit him down at the lip of the stage with his back to the audience. Deliver the monologue if you must, but put it all up front before the music begins. Let Judy sing the song, for Pete's sake.

For added poignancy, they might have her dad stand behind Judy. Indeed, the father's bond to his daughter is a constant in act one...and then overdone in act two. Despite not being present in Judy's life during act two, Dad is constantly present via clunky devices like flashbacks and improbable duets and by simply bringing him on stage. We get the importance of their relationship from act one. And using that memory in act two will be a lot more powerful if it's done sparingly. The finale would be stronger if Judy sits Mayer down and then faces him (and the audience) to make her plea. She delivers her monologue while her dad silently steps up behind her. Sensing his presence hovering nearby, Judy might even turn in his direction and smile...and then launch into "Over The Rainbow" in one glorious take.

That brings us to the show's fatal flaw. It never gives Judy Garland or Ruby Rakos her "star is born" moment. Again and again throughout the musical, she teases us with bursts of that powerful voice. Rakos joins in with a group already singing or a big solo number is interrupted by dialogue or cut short or joined in on by others. Big moments become duets. Solo spots become family sing-alongs. When Judy is delivering a gem during vocal lessons, her instructor bursts in vocally to tell us he knows this kid is something special.

How about just letting her *sing*? A big solo on "Zing! Went The Strings Of My Heart" at the climax of act one is undercut by a medical crisis. Her "Dear Mr. Gable" is truncated. Dad or Mickey or *somebody* is always joining in. Even "Over The Rainbow" is interrupted by Judy's

own gabfest.

Don't get me wrong. Rakos shines again and again. When she starts swinging "All Ma's Children," the other jaded kids at MGM do a double take with a look that says, "Hey, this one's got pipes!" She's part of some great numbers. And the emphasis there is on *parts*. Heck, it's possible Rakos doesn't sing a single song in full from start to finish! ("Morning Comes" may be the exception.) That's crazy! Since Rakos clearly has the talent to put them over, it's all the more frustrating.

Other issues have to be tackled, such as the lack of real drama in act two. The show strikes one note: Judy isn't pretty enough to be a star. And while intellectually we know she's having hit records and starring in hit films, it doesn't feel that way. We learn the obstacles in act one and virtually nothing changes in act two until the very end. A better sense of Judy climbing one mountain after another, conquering radio and even starring in hit films would allow her frustration about not getting that one big shot to stand on her own all the more palpable.

But first and foremost, allow her to sing. Give her the close-up in act one. Let Rakos fully shine in a musical number and not with twenty other people sharing the spotlight. Create that magical moment when everything and everyone else drops away and we get a chance to cheer her and her alone. And then do it again in act two. Let the audience be on her side and they'll become just as frustrated as Judy waiting for MGM to see what they see: a star.

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Minor Character: Under The Radar Festival at the Public \*\*\*

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The Pain Of My Belligerence \*

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Ink \*\*\*

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