



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "Kate, Do I Have Your Consent To Ask For A Kiss?"

KISS ME, KATE! *** out of ****

ROUNABOUT THEATRE AT STUDIO 54

Such fuss! Would the prim and proper Kelli O'Hara be capable of rolling around in the mud of a broad comedy? Would audiences be shocked by a 70 year old musical and -- can you imagine -- dated ideas of a battle between the sexes? Well, Kelli O'Hara can do anything (duh!) and classic shows offer more than their outmoded stereotypes or no one would continue to perform them.

So rest easy. *Kiss Me, Kate!* is what it's always been and that's old-fashioned fun with a terrific Cole Porter score, more good dancing than any other show on Broadway and a sweet romance at its heart that makes this silly comedy just a tad more heartfelt. Don't worry. No one is going to confuse this light musical with a kitchen sink drama. But the 2019 *Kiss Me, Kate!* has just enough genuine emotion to make it distinctive from the fondly remembered cartoonish version of 1999. To my mind, this one is less slapstick, more human and better.

The ground-breaking *Oklahoma* clearly raised everyone's game. Irving Berlin sucked it up and delivered *Annie Get Your Gun*, a show almost absurdly stuffed with standards. Cole Porter did the same with *Kiss Me, Kate!*, his valentine to a life in the theater and the last great work he ever did. (*Can-Can* and *Silk Stockings* are fine, but hardly great.)

In it, movie star Lilli Vanessi (Kelli O'Hara) returns to the theater to star in a new musical version of Shakespeare's *The Taming Of The Shrew* opposite her ex-husband Fred Graham (Will Chase). She's being wooed by a military man and future Presidential candidate who believes Lilli would make a great First Lady. Fred naturally thinks she



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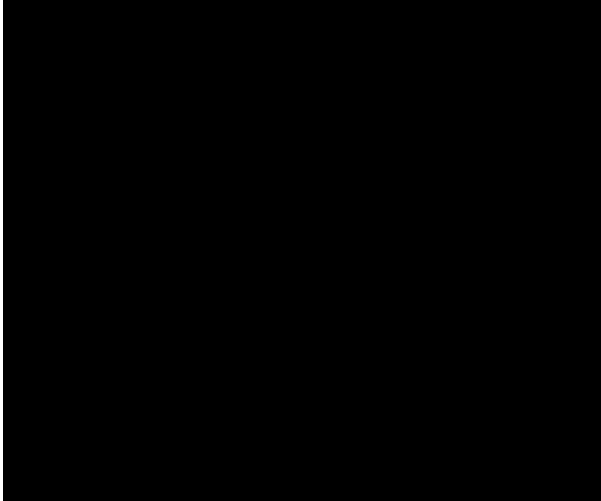
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should be the first lady of the theater. Washington? What a bore! They fight, they bicker, some gangsters show up to muscle Fred into paying a debt and end up on stage in bit parts, a hoofer (Corbin Bleu in another charming, breakout of a performance) falls in love with an actress (Stephanie Styles), some spanking does NOT take place (at least not when we're watching) and the show goes delightfully on.



It's all innocent fun. O'Hara does indeed radiate a natural dignity, which she used so well in *The King and I*. Here she raises it just a notch to imperious, making her descent into a free-for-all with Fred all the more enjoyable. In contrast, Will Chase can't deploy the out-there comedy chops he used in *Something Rotten*, making his Fred slightly more anonymous. True, there's no tension in wondering if Fred wants Lilli back because she's good box office or because he loves her, but that also means the core of the show is more intimate and sweet.

So the woman wins in the title card bout. But in the under card, we find the man on top. That's the simmering romance between hoofer Bill Calhoun (Bleu) and the actress with the wandering eye Lois Lane (Styles). Styles is making her Broadway debut and she mines the most out of her comic scenes. However, the generally terrific jazzy orchestrations of Larry Hochman throw Styles off her game on the big number "Always True To You In My Fashion." The syncopation of the song as presented here just doesn't let Styles land her jokes and that turns what should be a show-stopper into something less.

Bleu however is a winner from start to finish. With a nothing role, he adds charm and charisma to spare, making Bill someone you know you care about from the very start. A triple threat, Bleu gets two big showcases. Late in the show he performs "Bianca," a nothing song that serves as an excuse for some great dancing. He's so infectious you don't even blink when Bill is suddenly dancing on the ceiling. (Still, director Scott Ellis might have allowed Lois to come out from her dressing room sooner so she could overhear Bill singing her praises rather than just watching him dance.)

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And then there's the act two opener "Too Darn Hot." Like many great dance numbers, it builds and builds, with the choreography of Warren Carlyle topping itself effortlessly. Unlike some other big numbers, this one never feels like it's trying to show off. It happens so organically, so infectiously you never feel bludgeoned into appreciation. It's a genuine show-stopper and thank god -- those dancers need a long chance to rest and the applause gives it to them.

Worth the price of admission? Absolutely, but then so is O'Hara who radiates sexiness and charm and the sheer love of being onstage from start to the inevitable finish with the reprise of "Another Op'ning, Another Show." The sets by David Rockwell are spot-on for a 1950s touring show. True, the more human scale ups the emotional content and lowers the spoofy comedy. If you felt *The Producers* was a tad restrained, this is not the *Kiss Me, Kate!* for you. (Indeed, the gangsters -- usually an audience favorite -- fall utterly flat, another casualty since cartoons just don't make sense in this newly conceived world.) But who cares when you've got a torrent of great songs like "Wunderbar," "So In Love" and "Too Darn Hot," a foolproof book that clearly inspired Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* and a star like O'Hara? It's no pie in the face like the '99 version but it fully deserves that exclamation point.

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