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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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Theater: Cloudy Skies for Harry Connick Jr. and *On A Clear Day*

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ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER * 1/2 out of ****
ST. JAMES THEATRE

I've never seen any earlier incarnation of *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever*, the Lerner & Lane musical. By reputation I know it had a troubled book but some good songs; the clips of the film version were so leaden and awful I always avoided seeing that version as well. The original show must have been awfully confused because even with an entirely new book and complete re-imagination of the central story, *On A Clear Day* remains a muddled, unsatisfying work that -- except for one promising Broadway debut -- has little to offer.

Harry Connick Jr. stars as Dr. Mark Bruckner, a psychologist who is still mourning the death of his wife

three years earlier, even as his career soars. It's 1974 in New York City and he stumbles across a new patient: a "homosexual" (It's 1974 after all) who works as a florist, can't commit to his lawyer boyfriend and wants to quit smoking. David (played by David Turner) is also remarkably susceptible to hypnosis. In the very first session, Dr. Bruckner stumbles across memories that make no sense, memories of a woman named Melinda (Jessie Mueller) who performed during the Big Band era leading up to World War II. Does David have an elaborate fantasy life? Or is he the reincarnation of Melinda? And does Melinda seem so beguiling because Dr. Bruckner is finally ready to fall in love again or is he just fixating on this imaginary person to fill the void in his life? You won't care about the answers to any of these questions.

The show is framed as a lecture Dr. Bruckner is giving at a convention (not a terribly exciting idea) and though Connick is somewhat charming in those moments, he spends most of the show looking very glum and standing on the side of the stage observing others. *On A Clear Day* never shakes that depressive atmosphere. When a show is unfocused and lost, it's not surprising when all the individual elements fail to coalesce either. It was re-conceived and directed by Michael Mayer (with a new book by Peter Parnell),

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but it wasn't re-conceived nearly enough.

The biggest decision was to change the patient from a woman to a man and to have the past life character played by a separate actress. That proves a fatal error. Reportedly the main appeal of the original show was the *Venus In Fur*-style attraction of watching a talented actress play a contemporary character and then slip right into an entirely different personality. This *Clear Day* ups the doctor-patient relationship by having the patient be a gay man. The repercussions are many. One, we don't get the central pleasure of seeing one actor play two different characters. Two, there's no tension between the doctor and the patient of today because even though Dr. Bruckner has fallen hard for Melinda, this show makes every effort to disabuse us of the idea that Bruckner could actually be harboring gay tendencies himself. So not much is at stake since Bruckner can never have Melinda and clearly doesn't want David. Third, it means little chance for chemistry -- the show tries one awkward scene where Dr. Bruckner and David and Melinda all dance together, but it's not sexy or suggestive, just clumsy.

Mostly, the sex quotient is tamped down on every level. Dr. Bruckner mopes around, ignoring the women who throw themselves at him; his relationship with Melinda feels mostly like a devoted fan, not a would-be lover. Dr. Bruckner's one female friend (Kerry O'Malley in the thankless role of a frustrated love interest) is dressed in the most unattractive outfits possible; she looks like a frumpy schoolteacher. David Turner may be a marvelous actor but here his character is written and dressed and directed to be a sexless gay man of 1974 who mostly just pecks his boyfriend on the cheek. When he's described as uninteresting, we have to agree. David's relationship with his beau Warren (handsome, strong-voiced Drew Gehling unable to bring a non-role to life) feels positively platonic. Indeed, the one believable detail we learn about David early on is that he does not want to move in with Warren and can't bring himself to say "I love you" or commit seriously in any way. At the first sign of a romantic possibility with someone else, David jumps.

This doesn't feel as if David is fated to be with Warren but is scared of commitment; everything we're shown indicates David is settling for easy familiarity when he should be bolder and want something more both at work and in his love life. Yet, the entire show climaxes with having David (still afraid to say "I love you") doing the opposite of what we expect. And his big defining number does not indicate some newfound spirit of self-confidence. It asks "What Did I Have That I Don't Have?" where he wonders why his past life as Melinda was bolder and more fun. Playing it as a big triumphant moment the way this show does just doesn't make any sense.

The confusion goes even deeper. The setting of 1974 feels completely random and doesn't inform the story very much except for the somewhat jokey costumes of the students in Dr. Bruckner's class by costume designer Catherine Zuber.

The set by Christine Jones is efficient in changing scenes but the dominant look is a dizzying mural to create an air of hypnosis that involves trippy repetitions of squares and rectangles and the like. It looks smart as a curtain before the show begins (with Connick walking out through a giant keyhole so he can presumably unlock the unconscious) but ultimately it unmoors the show. The 1974 setting never gels and the flashbacks to 1943 and 1944 don't convince either because the dominant visuals pull us out of those periods every time. The routine, often clunky choreography by Joann M. Hunter fares no better.

Lawrence Yurman also unfortunately must be singled out for his work as musical director and on the vocal and instrumental music arrangements. Repeatedly on the big musical numbers, the vocals of the main characters clash with each other and the background singers. Whether it's "Wait Till We're Sixty-Five," "Open Your Eyes," "Melinda," "When I'm Being Born Again" or numerous other spots, what should be a joyous surge of voices joined in song instead sounds discordant or thin.

The show does have one redeeming feature: Jessie Mueller as the songbird Melinda Wells. Her scenes with the doctor are rather tame, consisting mostly of "hey, how are you?" type chatter while we watch her struggle and then succeed in her career. (The past life stuff makes absolutely no sense even on its own terms, not that it matters.) And her songs don't move the action forward and reveal character - they're essentially just stand-alone tunes. But Mueller delivers them beautifully, from her solo piano rendition of "Open Your Eyes" to her audition song "You're All The World To Me" to her big breakthrough with "Ev'ry Night At Seven," by far the night's most entertaining number complete with some convincing scatting at the finale. It's easy to believe that in a past life Mueller really was a big band singer. Her future seems clear as well: more work on Broadway.

Here's Harry Connick Jr. swinging the title song on *Dancing With The Stars*. He'll be back on Broadway soon, hopefully in something more exuberant and suited to him. (Meanwhile, doesn't he owe us the albums *35* and *40*? If he didn't record them, let's hope he makes time in 2012 for recording *45*.)

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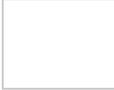
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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these shows with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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Charles Milburn

You can't fix stupid...but you can elect it.

69 Fans

05:00 PM on 12/20/2011

Curious why Book of Mormon is not on this list.

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reikomax

9 Fans

03:00 AM on 12/19/2011

Barbra Streisand's portrayal of Daisy Gamble in the film--was incomparable! She even had two new songs written especially for her. The endless trashing of Ms. Streisand's filmwork grows ever so tiresome.

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ehorth

967 Fans

06:09 PM on 12/15/2011

OK, I'll bite. Mr. Giltz, your comments regarding the Broadway version "On A Clear Day" certainly make it sound like a production I would not want to see. You say that you saw "scenes" of the movie that were extremely leaden - that's too bad because Yves Montand and Barbra Streisand (even the young Jack Nicholson) were great to watch. It was certainly more romantic than this mixed-up concoction. Changing the flash-back to WWII, to my mind, doesn't place the earlier life of Melinda far enough in the past which the movie version did, and, made far more interesting. I saw the film in 1974 and was always struck by the then current issues of conformity vs non-conformity that Streisand was so perfect at. I had no issue with the accents of the French/Italian Montand and the extreme nasal Brooklyn of Streisand - they were perfect to highlight the utter "banalness" of Daisy Gamble vs her past life Melinda. It's a great romantic fantasy.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz

freelance writer

127 Fans

03:02 PM on 12/16/2011

ehorth, thanks for the comment. I see a LOT of movies but somehow not that one. Now having seen the show, I'll admit I'm interested in exactly what the original story was. I imagine the movie changed it a bit but I'll probably check it out soon. At least we get to hear Streisand sing.

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