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Red, Hot and Blue!



Flash back to 1936. The country was in the middle of the Great Depression. The government was scrambling for economic answers, but the public perception was that it was inept, insolvent, and incompetent. Poor, unemployed people everywhere were pointing accusatory fingers at the rich, and everybody were either formulating their own get-rich scheme or drowning their sorrow at the local pub or music hall. How do you make a musical that people would go see in such an environment? How about a musical about a lottery run to find a lost lover featuring singable melodies designed to poke fun at the economic situation and make you forget your worries?

The Los Angeles premiere of Cole Porter's 1936 hit "Red, Hot and Blue!" at the Whitefire Theatre is an homage to this pre-World-War-II era, complete with silly word-play and slapstick humor, a wild melodramatic plot, hard-on-their-luck characters who'll do anything to fulfill their desires, a two piece orchestra consisting of the piano and the drum, and an array of songs specifically written for this musical including "Perennial Debutantes," "Carry On," "You've Got Something," and "What a Great Pair We'll Be."

The story begins at a jail. "Nails" Duquesne (Allyson Turner) is a rich widow who went from manicurist to philanthropist after marrying her now-deceased husband. She is visiting Lark's Nest prison to recruit able convicts to help her run a national lottery. The object of the lottery is to find lawyer and playboy Bob Hale's (Kyle Nudo) love of his life. That is, to find the 4-year old girl whom Bob loved as a 6-year old until he shoved her onto a waffle iron, permanently scarring her for life. Soon the US government seizes the opportunity to balance its budget using the ridiculous five hundred million dollar share for winning. Nails is in love with Bob, but by stipulation of the lottery, he is to marry the result of the national search. This creates a problem that he hopes to solve with the convicts hired by Nails.

Perhaps the best depression antidote of all is jolly, optimistic, beautiful music. In one memorable example, Nails sings a solo to conclude act one, when she is resolved to the fact that her man Bob is marrying someone else. Yet her mood is not low, but, as the song title suggests, "Ridin' High." "Life is great, life's grand," she sings, "future all planned, no more clouds in the sky." It's as if her losing the love of her life is like the depression everyone's going through. Times are tough, but let's celebrate as if it isn't. Turner's rendition appropriately starts with a pained expression that gives way to more happy refrains as the lyrics and the music inspire her to feel better. By the end, we'd think we're all genuinely joyful even though circumstances suggest otherwise.

One character who doesn't buy all the joy spread around the musical is "Policy" Pinkle (Richard Horvitz), who keeps engineering plans to get back to Lark's Nest prison after Nails got him out of jail to contrive the lottery. In "A Little Skipper from Heaven Above," Pinkle hilariously sings about a male captain who gives birth to a baby to illustrate the point that nothing is what it seems. Horvitz plays the part with relish, delivering one punchline after another, and singing with a subdued, baritone voice that befits a crook wise to his ways. Some of the comedy is created by the circumstances, such as when a prison break occurs, but concludes with

Pinkle announcing that people actually want to break in, not out. Apparently, the Great Depression has made jail an attractive living arrangement. Pinkle's many attempts to get himself into trouble so he can get back into jail are stomach-achingly funny.

Horvitz's best scene, however, takes place at the Senate committee room, where Congressmen have summoned Pinkle to get the story on his illegal dealings in regard to the lottery. In an effort to secure a place for himself back in jail, Pinkle interrogates himself using a lawyer persona, playing both the accuser and the accused simultaneously. Horvitz pulls the stunt magnificently, even adding the touch of tripping over himself as the lawyer being tripped by the defendant. Pinkle does so well as the prosecutor that Pinkle the accused gives up, confessing his crime and telling the lawyer "your vocabulary traps me."

Due to the loss of the orchestration, the entire performance is done with only piano and percussion. That actually combined well with the microphone-less singing, but it also made the musical seem like an arcade, a small affair. The ending, which I won't give away here, seems very abrupt. It seems as if Porter put so much into the first act (1.5 hours long!) that the second act (30 minutes) ran out of both songs and plot. This is also a musical without a hero. The male protagonist Bill tries to get whatever he wants by hiring convicts to do anything short of (and including) murder. The female protagonist Nails makes no qualms about bending the law to get her millions for philanthropy. Even the Congressmen try to use the lottery to make millions for themselves while deceiving the people, until the Supreme Court intervenes.

This modern performance of "Red, Hot and Blue!" keeps all the songs originally written for it by Cole Porter. Even though the performers are a lot younger than Ethel Merman, Jimmy Durante, Bob Hope, and the original cast, everything else about the work seeks to preserve the original intent of Porter, including the lyrics, the simple sets, and the style of singing. It is indeed a flashback to 1936.

"Red, Hot and Blue!" is being revived by Whitefire Theatre (<http://www.whitefiretheatre.com>) until July 5 in Sherman Oaks, California.

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