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Amazing Grace: Fiction Is Duller Than Truth

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 29th, 2015

During a recent early morning subway ride, a street preacher loudly burst into the traditional hymn *Amazing Grace*. When she finished with the last verse, she told the entire car the story of the song's writer John Newton, a reprobate 18th century English slave trader who had a religious conversion and became an advocate for abolition. This impromptu performance was more interesting and authentic than the new Broadway musical about Newton which bears the name of his most famous work. The subway preacher's tale contained messy and convincing details while the melodramatic book by theater neophyte Christopher Smith, who also wrote the music and lyrics, and the more-experienced Arthur Giron is filled with enough cliches and neat plot resolutions to stock a 1970s TV miniseries.



Chuck Cooper in *Amazing Grace*

Credit: *Joan Marcus*

You do have to admire Smith, a former Philadelphia police officer, for following his dream and getting the show, his first professional writing credit, onto the Main Stem. But his score is a generic retread of *Les Miz* and Lloyd Webber featuring simplistic rhymes and familiar melodies. (There are a few African-influenced interpolations for the black characters.) The aforementioned book is also a stew of reliable tropes following the rakish young Newton as he rebels against his imperious father, courts the gracious Mary Catlett, has numerous adventures at sea with his loyal retainer Thomas, and finally reconciles with dad—on the latter's deathbed, marries Mary over the objections of her buffoonish Army suitor, frees all of his slaves, and leads the entire cast in the title song (the sole distinctive one in the entire score.)

Director Gabriel Barre does a serviceable job of staging the action, supplying a thrilling first act finale with Thomas appearing to rescue John from drowning by means of flying harnesses. It's an exciting effect, achieved with the aide of Ken Billington and Paul Miller's evocative aquatic lighting, but it's the only surprising moment in otherwise pedestrian production.

Josh Young as Newton and Erin Mackey as Mary display impressive pipes, but the supporting cast steals center stage. As Thomas, Chuck Cooper serves as narrator and provides a steely spine for this limp spectacle. His rumbling bass injects real drama into "Nowhere Left to Run," Thomas' indictment of Newton as he sells his friend into servitude in Barbados. In a drippy reconciliation scene with the former slaver rescuing Thomas, Cooper's eloquent eyes and physical life convey the inhuman cruelty the character has suffered far better than the treacly words of Smith and Giron. As he did in *Doctor Zhivago*, another *Les Miz* wanna-be, Tom Hewitt lends a subtle gravity to the

villain role, in this case Newton's rigid father. Harriett D. Foy is deliciously evil as the treacherous Princess Peyai, an African royal selling her own people to the likes of Newton. She gives a refreshingly nasty bite to these overly earnest proceedings.

Opened July 16 for an open run. Nederlander Theatre, 208 W. 41st St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$65—\$135. (800) 653-8000 or www.ticketmaster.com.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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