Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

More Fire Than Doubt

David Sheward · Friday, December 17th, 2021

The musical version of *Mrs. Doubtfire* had several strikes against it before the show even got to bat. First, there is the iconic performance of Robin Williams as Daniel Hilliard, the divorced dad who disguises himself as an elderly Scottish nanny to be near his kids in the original hit 1993 film. What leading man has the chops to match Williams' versatility while singing and dancing? Secondly, we recently had another screen-to-stage tuner with basically the same plot. A musical adaptation of *Tootsie* opened to rave reviews in 2019 and also featured a self-centered actor donning dowdy drag in order to get control of his life and becomes a better man by walking a mile in heels.

Rob McClure in *Mrs. Doubtfire*.
Credit: Joan Marcus

But luckily, this feel-good family show has the right creative and onstage talent to make it a winner. There's Wayne and Karey Kirkpatrick and John O'Farrell, the team behind the hilarious satire *Something Rotten*; keen-eyed, four-time Tony winning director Jerry Zaks; and an energetic and versatile leading man/woman in Rob McClure, a delightful star who was the best thing about such musical near-misses as *Chaplin* and *Honeymoon in Vegas*. The book by Karey Kirkpatrick and O'Farrell does not significantly depart from the original screenplay as *Tootsie*'s did, but there are enough inventive musical numbers by the two Kirkpatricks, slapstick farcical schtick, and genuinely funny dialogue to make for a joy-filled evening for kids and adults.

Among the stand-outs are a riotous tap number in which Daniel as Doubtfire attempts to learn how to cook with YouTube chefs popping out of David Korins' jack-in-the-box set, a drag fashion show with icons ranging from Margaret Thatcher to Princess Di (terrific costumes by Catharine Zuber), and a nightmare sequence with Daniel's court-appointed caseworker (a dynamic Charity Angel Dawson) transformed into a fire-breathing diva backed up by a chorus of Doubtfires. Lorin Latarro is responsible for the snazzy choreography.

Jake Ryan Flynn, Analise Scarpaci, Rob McClure and Avery Sell in *Mrs. Doubtfire.*
Credit: Joan Marcus

There are flaws here, but they are not egregious enough to spoil an otherwise light and frothy dessert of a show. The story strains credulity and there are lapses in logic. At one point, we're at a launch party for an athletic fashion line and then all of a sudden we're at a trendy gym with the disguised Doubtfire exercising along with the muscular rival for his ex-wife (an attractive and sturdy Mark Evans). But somehow, Zaks' deft and proficient staging keeps the action moving at just the right clip.

In addition, the central role of Daniel Hilliard can be a bit of a jerk. Written for the incredible talents of Robin Williams, Daniel is an underemployed actor with a gift for voices. He's funny, but

incredibly irresponsible and immature. (I wrote in my notebook, “This guy’s obnoxious. No wonder his wife wants a divorce.”) Yet as played by the charming McClure, he grows on you till you finally fall in love with both him and his motherly alter ego. Onstage almost constantly, McClure conveys Daniel’s dazzling versatility and his intense love of his kids while headlining several numbers, making lightning fast changes in and out of drag and wearing a heavy face mask, heavy padding and a large wig. It’s a dazzling show of stamina and talent.

Brad Oscar, Rob McClure and J. Harrison Ghee in *Mrs. Doubtfire.*
Credit: Joan Marcus

But this is not a one-man/woman show. The rest of the company gets plenty of opportunities to shine. Jenn Gambatese infuses the thankless role of Miranda, Daniel’s estranged wife, with dignity and depth. Analise Scarpaci displays a gorgeous voice and impressive acting chops as the couple’s eldest daughter and Avery Sell and Jake Ryan Flynn avoid cute-kiddie cliches as her siblings. Brad Oscar and J. Harrison Ghee find comic gold as the gay make-up artists who transform Daniel. The priceless Peter Bartlett nearly steals the show (and that’s saying something) as a daffy kiddie show host (He brings the house down with one line). Jodi Kimura is a deadpan delight as a humorless TV exec. In addition to the previously mentioned Charity Angel Dawson and Mark Evans, Cameron Adams, Aaron Kaburick, and Alena Watters are a riot as the Internet cooks. Watters also has a spiffy comedy bit as a flamenco singer.

Mrs. Doubtfire is not perfect, but it makes you laugh, has a message on diverse families and features a spectacular lead performance and an impressive supporting cast. Maybe not all the

burners are lit, but it’s enough of a fire to extinguish any doubts.

Opened Dec. 5 for an open run. Stephen Sondheim Theater, 124 W. 43rd St., NYC. Tue—Thu 7pm; Fri 8pm; Sat 2pm & 8pm; Sun 2pm & 7:30pm. $49—$229. Running time: two hours and 35 mins. including intermission. www.telecharge.com.

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