

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Prince of Broadway Doesn't Quite Add Up

David Sheward · Wednesday, August 30th, 2017

No one can deny the incredible track record of Harold Prince, the winner of a record 21 Tony Awards and the director and/or producer of almost 50 Broadway shows over six decades. His innovative stagings of such landmark works as *Cabaret*, *Company*, *Follies*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Evita*, and *Phantom of the Opera* (to name just a few) revolutionized the American musical theater. Having said that, his highly-anticipated career retrospective, *Prince of Broadway*, now in a limited run from the non-commercial Manhattan Theater Club after an earlier version played Japan, is perfectly enjoyable, but not the stunning blockbuster we've come to expect from Mr. Prince.



Bryonha Marie Parham and Kaley Ann Vorhees in *Prince of Broadway*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

The show is basically a series of numbers from 17 of Prince's productions, loosely strung together by first-person narration by David Thompson (presumably based on interviews with and quotes by the subject) shared by the high-caliber nine-member cast. Unlike previous helmer hoedowns such as *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* and *Fosse*, the material doesn't flow smoothly or fit together neatly. That may be because those previously-mentioned productions celebrated the works of single choreographers—creating evening-long pieces with a unified vision and theme of movement, whereas *Prince* is a jumble of mostly solo or small-scale singing vignettes from a multitude of sources. There are 35 different book-writers, lyricists and composers listed on the title page of the Playbill.

Thompson's narration provides scant context and fails to tie together the wildly divergent selections or answer such questions as "What is Prince's aesthetic? And what do all these shows have in common other than the fact that Prince was involved in their creation?" Despite the solid production by Prince and his choreographer and co-director Susan Stroman and top-drawer design elements (particularly Howell Binkley's lighting), the structure resembles a random "And-Then-I-Directed-or-Produced" pageant. One similar number follows another and the pace slackens considerably in the second act, especially when two static songs set in prison (from *Parade* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*) are placed next to each other.



Chuck Cooper in *Prince of Broadway*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

To be fair, one doesn't go to the theater for a documentary or a lecture in stage history, and there is

much to relish even if the overall package is not greater than the sum of its exemplary parts. Tony Yazbeck has a spectacular dance solo from *Follies* (fantastic choreography from Stroman). Emily Skinner corners the market on wry regret with “Send in the Clowns” and “Ladies Who Lunch.” Chuck Cooper delivers depth as Tevye, Joe from *Show Boat* and Sweeney Todd. Brandon Uranowitz is a delightfully decadent Emcee from *Cabaret*. Bryonha Marie Parham conveys the poignancy of Sally Bowles from *Cabaret* and the joyful sass of Queenie from *Show Boat*. Karen Ziemba pours reams of subtext into her Fraulein Schneider and Mrs. Lovett. Kaley Ann Voorhees displays a lovely soprano in vignettes from *West Side Story* and *Phantom*. Michael Xavier and Janet Decal are zesty and zippy in “You’ve Got Possibilities” from Prince’s short-lived *Superman* musical.

There is so much potential here. Too bad the experience was like leafing through a photo album (remember those?), or to use a more up-to-date reference, clicking through a series of YouTube videos that happen to pop up when you put Harold Prince in the search engine.

Aug. 25—Oct. 22. Manhattan Theatre Club at Samuel J. Friedman Theater, 261 W. 47th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2 and 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2 and 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$89—\$169. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

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