

Cultural Daily

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Well Hello, Betty!

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, February 6th, 2019

Betty Buckley is the latest Broadway diva to pick up the baton as the irrepressible matchmaker Dolly Levi in the Touring Production of *Hello, Dolly!* that's been the toast of Broadway since Bette Midler's triumphant return to the Great White Way in 2017. Buckley certainly has the Broadway bonafides, having won the Tony for her portrayal of Grizabella in *Cats* in 1983 and later donning the role of silent screen star Norma Desmond in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Sunset Boulevard* in 1996.

Buckley received a warm reception from a supportive and enthusiastic opening night audience at the Pantages Theater after being sidelined by a brief illness during its run at Segerstrom Hall the previous week. I was rooting for Buckley along with the rest of the audience and I'm happy to report that she did a commendable job, headlining a show which is a bit shopworn and dated, redeemed by a fetching score which has stood the test of time. Not having seen Bette Midler's scalp-worthy Dolly or the passing of the baton to Bernadette Peters, I can't really compare Buckley's performance to theirs. And maybe that's a good thing. Perhaps it's best to judge each Dolly as a separate and distinct take on an iconic role. Though her vocals aren't what they used to be, Buckley brings a worldly, seasoned approach to the role and manages to pull it off with aplomb. Buckley's performance brought to mind hints of Angela Lansbury, who though she never played Dolly, likely would have nailed it. To Buckley's credit, she wears the mantle of the iconic matchmaker well and shines during the most important parts of the show, such as her triumphant return to the Harmonia Gardens where she's worshipped and adored by the wait staff. Buckley's comedic timing was spot-on during the scene where she's savoring her gourmet meal at the Harmonia Gardens, oblivious to the courtroom proceedings around her.



Beyond Buckley's performance, the supporting cast turns in commendable work that seemed to please the audience, but for this reviewer seemed to miss the mark. Lewis J. Stadlen as Horace Vandergelder is suitably gruff, miserly and misanthropic, but his Vandergelder leans more toward caricature and cartoonish when more dimension and depth would have served the character better. Nic Rouleau as Cornelius Hackle impresses with goosebump-inducing vocals which filled the Pantages, especially on his first outing "Put On Your Sunday Clothes." But his performance seemed a bit over-the-top and overly eager to remind us that we're watching a bigger than life MUSICAL. Jess LeProtto turns in a winning performance as Cornelius' sidekick/co-worker Barnaby, but his repeated "Holey Moley" refrains seemed more cloying than charming. I suppose one could argue that he's just playing the part as scripted and fully committing to it. LeProtto's performance evened out (and improved) over the course of the show, particularly when he had a

chance to show off his rather impressive dance moves. As for Cornelius and Barnaby's love interests, Irene Molloy and Minnie, played respectively by Analisa Leaming and Kristen Hahn, I can't really fault their performances, but everything felt a little paint-by-the-numbers. "Ribbons Down My Back" is a lovely song and while there's nothing wrong with Leaming's rendition, it sounded like something you might hear at a beauty pageant. It lacked the dimension and depth of the minor notes that bring out the richness of this character. It seemed like a missed opportunity to mine the more nuanced layers of this character. Instead, it felt more like this is the part of the show where we hear a familiar favorite.

The real heroes of this production are the chorus. Their energy, their collective vocal power and their energetic dancing rescued this production from a rather by-the-numbers revival. They provided the "oomph" that seemed to be lacking from the supporting cast. Their indispensable contribution was particularly evident in the lead-up to Dolly's highly anticipated return to the Harmonia Gardens. The Waiters' Gallop dance sequence from *Hello, Dolly!* is almost as iconic as the Bottle Dance from that other Broadway staple, *Fiddler on the Roof*. And this crew brought it. When Buckley arrives, resplendent in her shimmery red gown and feathered hat, the wait staff leave no doubt that Dolly is indeed back where she belongs. Was there much chemistry between Dolly and Horace that made their eventual union plausible? I can't really answer with a resounding yes, but that's one of the built-in challenges of this show which has eluded many pairings before and will likely continue to bedevil future productions for years to come.

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