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## Regional Reviews: Phoenix

### *Funny Girl*

Arizona Broadway Theatre

Review by [Gil Benbrook](#) | [Season Schedule](#)

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Arizona Broadway Theatre is known for presenting lush productions of classic and contemporary Broadway hits. So it's somewhat refreshing that they chose to open their 12th season with *Funny Girl*, which, while it's a classic show, isn't produced that often. ABT's production has superb leads, a talented ensemble, and solid creative elements, all of which add up to an excellent theatrical experience.

*Funny Girl* portrays the rise to fame of real-life vaudeville star Fanny Brice. It's virtually impossible to write a review of this musical without talking first about Barbra Streisand, who received a Tony nomination for starring in the original Broadway production of the show and won an Oscar for headlining the film adaptation. To say that *Funny Girl* is what shot Streisand to stardom isn't exactly true, since she was already fairly well known from her appearances on numerous TV shows (including "The Ed Sullivan Show," "The Judy Garland Show," and "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson") and she had already released two albums which won three Grammy Awards, before *Funny Girl's* 1964 Broadway premiere. However, the 1968 film adaptation did gain her a lot of exposure and the attachment that Streisand has to *Funny Girl*, as well as the quality of her portrayal of Fanny in the film, mean that any production of this musical must contend with being compared to the image she so magnificently portrayed on film.



**Liz Fallon and Jamie Parnell**

*Photo by Scott Samplin / Arizona Broadway Theatre*

Another issue with the musical is that, unlike other classic shows that became hit films, such as *The Sound of Music* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, the stage score for *Funny Girl* is very different from the beloved musical version. Jule Styne and Bob Merrill's score features plenty of hits, but people who only know the film might be upset that the stage version doesn't include any of Brice's hit songs, such as "My Man," that were highlights of the movie. These are why so few theatre companies produce this show.

Fortunately, ABT chose Liz Fallon to fill the gigantic shoes that Streisand left for any actress attempting to play Fanny. Fallon doesn't attempt any form of Streisand impersonation; instead she infuses her portrayal with the firecracker determination of this woman who knows she has the talent but is concerned that her average looks will get in the way of her success. Fallon's strong and clear voice send Fanny's songs soaring, with her delivery of each song lyric and line of dialogue expertly played and full of thought, passion and pathos. Her voice might not have the astounding clarity, control and power of Streisand's (whose does?) but her facial expressions, body language, and determination elevate the songs so each one appears to grow organically out of Fanny and the moment she is currently experiencing. Fallon's versions of "I'm the Greatest Star," "Don't Rain on My Parade," and "The Music that Makes Me Dance" are stunningly in their delivery.

Nick Arnstein, the man who waltzes in and out of Fanny's life, is a somewhat one-dimensional part, yet Jamie Parnell manages to expertly show that there are many layers to this complicated, risk-taking man, especially the deep pride that lies beneath his debonair exterior. Parnell has a wonderful singing voice and he and Fallon elicit plenty of sparks in Fanny and Nick's passionate and tumultuous relationship. Gerri Weagraff is a gem as Fanny's mother and Phil Sloves does good work as Fanny's dancer friend Eddie Ryan. T. V. Reeves brings a fatherly gravitas to the part of Florenz Ziegfeld, the theatrical impresario who hires Fanny, and Johanna Carlisle is fun and funny as Fanny's nosey neighbor Mrs. Strakosh.

Isobel Lennart's book is good in how it shows the many obstacles that Fanny faces, as well as how her family and friends are always looking out for her best interests in her relationship with Nick, and Clayton Phillips does a solid job of ensuring that the dramatic moments in the script have weight without shortchanging the many laughs. Kurtis W. Overby provides high energy dances including a rousing tap number for "Rat-Tat-Tat-Tat." Music director Lizzie Hatfield makes sure the large cast and small band sound full and bright. Jim Hunter's set design includes several large set pieces, including fairly elaborate ones for the back alley of Fanny's mother's saloon and the interior of Fanny and Nick's house, though the designs for the Ziegfeld Follies numbers are a little lackluster, which doesn't exactly portray the lush, over the top settings that Ziegfeld was known for. Fortunately, Lottie Dixon's costumes are a non-stop parade of period dresses and outfits, including some smashing ones for Fanny.

Arizona Broadway Theatre is to be commended for taking on the challenge of presenting *Funny Girl*. With Liz Fallon in the lead, solid work from Jamie Parnell, a talented cast, firm direction, and fine creative elements, you will most likely forget the differences between the stage and film versions and may even, for a brief moment, even forget who Barbra Streisand is.

Also of note, ABT continues their fun practice of crafting specialty drinks that are themed to the show. So, while you may not hear Brice's hit "Second Hand Rose," which was in the film, you can order the cocktail version from your waiter. Their menu is also themed to the show with several New York food selections.

*Funny Girl* runs through November 13th, 2016, at Arizona Broadway Theatre, 7701 West Paradise Lane in Peoria. Tickets can be ordered at [www.azbroadway.org](http://www.azbroadway.org) or by calling 623 776-8400.

Book by Isobel Lennart, from her original story

Music by Jule Styne

Lyrics by Bob Merrill

Stage Direction: Clayton Phillips

Choreography: Kurtis W. Overby

Music Direction: Lizzie Hatfield

Set Design: Jim Hunter

Costume Design: Lottie Dixon

Wig/Makeup Design: Amanda Gran  
Sound Design: Joshua Tobin  
Lighting Design: Dan Efros  
Executive Producer: Kiel Klaphake  
Casting and Artistic Producer: Cassandra Klaphake

Cast:

Fanny Brice: Liz Fallon  
Nick Arnstein: Jamie Parnell  
Eddie Ryan: Phil Sloves  
Mrs. Brice: Gerri Weagraff  
Florenz Ziegfeld: T. V. Reeves  
Tom Keeney: Tim Shawver  
Mrs. Strakosh: Johanna Carlisle  
Mrs. O'Malley: Carolyn McPhee  
Mrs. Meeker: Anasofia Gallegos  
Female Ensemble: Emily Rhein, Haley Jones, Lauren Paley, Jennifer Maurer, Ali Whitwell, Dwan Hayes  
Male Ensemble: Evan Dolan, Chuckie Dixon, Marty Craft, Ian Connor, Tyler Pirrung  
Renaldi/Male Ensemble: Tony Blosser

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