

Regional Reviews: Minneapolis/St. Paul

Anastasia National Tour

Review by [Arthur Dorman](#) | [Season Schedule](#)

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Anastasia, a bountiful, sumptuous, imaginatively put together musical that arrived on Broadway in 2017, makes its first appearance in the Twin Cities at the Orpheum under the banner of the Broadway on Hennepin series. The show ran for two years on Broadway, yet never hit the mark of being a big hit. Based on this touring production, it deserved far more attention than it received.

Anastasia is an imagined tale of Anastasia, youngest daughter of Russian Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra who, rumor had it, was the sole survivor of the massacre of the Romanov family by Bolshevik revolutionaries in 1918. In the person of Kyla Stone, smashing in the title role, it is easy to believe that no one could destroy this indefatigable young woman.

The musical is based on the 1997 animated film of the same name, which was inspired by the 1956 film that won an Academy Award for Ingrid Bergman in the title role. That film, in turn, was based on a 1952 play by French playwright Marcelle Maurette and its English translation by Maurette and Guy Bolton that ran for nine months on Broadway in 1954. There was also *Anya*, a 1965 musical with a book by George Abbott and Guy Bolton, music and lyrics by Robert Wright and George Forrest, in 1965, but that lasted less than one month. As a stage and screen character, Anastasia, who also goes by the name Anya, has certainly received a lot of attention. Indeed, the mystique surrounding her hypothetical survival is fascinating.

Every one of these iterations introduces us to Anya, a poor young woman suffering amnesia. She cannot remember her name, where she came from, or anything about her past life, but she does bear a resemblance to the young princess Anastasia, last seen being shepherded out of the Tsar's palace by revolutionary Bolshevik. A shrewd con artist notices this resemblance and plots to persuade Anya to impersonate the long-lost Anastasia in order to claim the substantial reward offered by her grandmother, the Dowager Empress Dowager, who had left Russia to live in the comforts of Paris before the revolution.

The story is a serious one, with its theme of how an individual discovers who they are truly meant to be and their place in the world, while also treading on the grisly history of the Bolshevik revolution and the lives of Russian nobility who spent those years living in exile. Audience members now, though, will primarily recall its most recent retelling, the animated film, which tilts the narrative to appeal more to children. It invented elements of magic in the characters of the evil spiritualist Rasputin and his sidekick, a talking albino bat, and omitted most of the historical-political themes, leaving it as a simple good guys (Anya and her friends) versus bad guys (Rasputin and his bat) stand-off.

The musical wisely jettisons Rasputin and all hints of magic, and creates a new villain, Bolshevik officer Gleb, whose father was a member of the squad of assassins who killed the Romanovs. Unlike Rasputin, Gleb is conflicted, torn between completing his father's work, one of the Romanov's assassins, and a sprig of tenderness for the plight of the lost Anastasia. In short, while *Anastasia* is suitable for families, it most certainly is not aimed at kids in the way of *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, or *Aladdin*.



Sam McLellan and Kyla Stone

Photo by Jeremy Daniel

What the musical does retain from the animated movie is the team that created its songs, Stephen Flaherty (music) and Lynn Ahrens (lyrics), who kept the five best songs from the movie—including the Oscar nominated "Journey to the Past"—and wrote over a dozen new ones. The late playwright Terrence McNally wrote the musical's book. McNally, Flaherty and Ahrens all took home Tonys for their collaboration on *Ragtime*, another sprawling historical fiction, and though *Anastasia* does not attain that high level, it nonetheless succeeds in all ways important for a musical. McNally's book moves briskly, adroitly weaves in background information needed to understand the broader context of its narrative, and enables its characters to develop as distinctive individuals who grow in important ways over the course of the show.

Along with "Journey to the Past," four other holdovers from the movie—"Once Upon a December," "A Rumor in St. Petersburg," "Learn to Do It," and "Paris Holds the Key (to Your Heart)"—are all dandy, the first a haunting lullaby, the others staged—respectively—as rollicking production numbers. Of the new songs, all but one do their job to advance the plot, develop an atmosphere, or explore characters. "Stay, I Pray You," a haunting homage to the heartache of refugees, is quite beautiful and relevant. Its counterpart, "Land of No Return," depicts resettled refugees from Russia submerging their nostalgia in Parisian decadence, with another full-out production number. "In a Crowd of Thousands" wonderfully turns the tide on the growing attraction between Anya and Dmitry. The exception is "The Press Conference," a likeable enough piece, but one that delays the resolution of the story without bringing anything new to it.

The show is one of the most stunningly designed to come along in a long time. Alexander Dodge's sets work in unison with Aaron Rhyne's extraordinary projections to create palace chambers, ballrooms, a ballet hall, street scenes, slums, a train platform, a grand tour of Paris, and an amazingly effective view of travelers huddled in a railroad car. Linda Cho's costumes give us opulent finery of Russian nobility, proletarian Bolshevik uniforms, ragged garb of Russian masses, and the smart apparel of Parisian bourgeoisie. Donald Holder's lighting and Peter Hylenski's work on sound also contribute to a production that is constantly beautiful to behold.

With a complex plot and every element lavished with attention, the show receives a steady directorial hand from Sarah Hartmann, based on the original work of Darko Tresnjak, so the components mesh to forge a coherent whole. Bill Burns' choreography, based on the original by Peggy Hickey, gives us several big production numbers, incorporating Charleston, waltzes, and tango modes along with ghostly images of court dances that haunt Anya's buried memories and a ballet excerpt from "Swan Lake." Jeremy Robin Lyons conducts an eight-member orchestra that beautifully brings Flaherty's music to life.

Kyla Stone's performance as Anya sets a high standard, with gorgeous singing and an intelligent presence as convincing in moments of anguish as when mugging merrily with the con men who will help bring her to Paris where she hopes to connect with her forgotten past. Sam McLellan rises to that standard as Dmitry, the daring schemer who becomes much more to Anya than her ticket to Paris, boldly recognizing his longings in "Everything to Win." Brandon Delgado projects Gleb's inner turmoil in his pursuit of Anya, gravely affirming his mission in "Still."

Brandon Delgado is appealingly ebullient as Dmitry's accomplice Vlad. Gerri Weagraff makes us believe the Dowager Empress' heartrending decision to suspend the search for her lost granddaughter, movingly voiced in "Close the Door," and Madeline Raube, in the less developed role of Countess Lily, nonetheless makes a whopping impression with her dance and comedic skills, especially in a salty duet with Delgado, "The Countess and the Common Man." A large talented ensemble create busy courts and crowded streets required for this sprawling story.

With the notable exception of *Hamilton*, most successful musicals of recent years have either been smaller in scale, in terms of the span of time or place they embrace, or jukebox bio-musicals. *Anastasia* is a musical created on a large canvas, and with great success. It is a treat to both the ear and eye, the narrative remains engrossing from start to its immensely satisfying ending, and it is presented with a cast—in particular, Kyla Stone—who, if anything, make it seem even better than it already is.

Anastasia runs through December 19, 2021, at the Orpheum Theatre, 910 Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis MN. Tickets: \$40.00 - \$146.00. For ticket information, including availability of student and educator rush tickets, call 612-339-7007 or visit hennepintheatretrust.org. For more information on the tour, visit anastasiathemusical.com/tour/.

Book: Terrence McNally; Music and Vocal Arrangements: Stephen Flaherty; Lyrics: Lynn Ahrens; Director: Sarah Hartman; Original Director: Darko Tresnjak; Choreographer: Bill Burns; Original Choreographer: Peggy Hickey; Set Design: Alexander Dodge; Costume Design: Linda Cho; Lighting Design: Donald Holder; Sound Design: Peter Hylenski; Projection Design: Aaron Rhyne; Hair and Wig Design: Charles G. LaPointe; Makeup Design: Joe Dulude II; Orchestrations: Doug Besterman; Dance Arrangements: David Chase; Music Director and Conductor: Jeremy Robin Lyons; Casting: Jason Styres; Production Stage Manager: Mariah Young; Executive Producer: Seth Wenig;

Cast: Mikayla Agrella (Empress Alexandra/ensemble), Lance Timothy Barker (ensemble), William Aaron Bishop (ensemble), Brandon Delgado (Gleb), Taya Diggs * (Little Anastasia), Thomas Henke (ensemble), Dakota Hoar (ensemble), Veronica Rae Jiao (ensemble), Evin Johnson (ensemble), Ceron Jones (Count Leopold/ensemble), Madeline Kendall (ensemble), Victoria Madden (ensemble), Sam McLellan (Dmitry), Christian McQueen (Tsar Nicholas II/Count Ipolitov/ensemble), Madeline Raube (Countess Lily), Bryan Seastrom (Vlad), Marley Sophia * (Little Anastasia), Taylor Stanger (ensemble), Sarah Statler (ensemble), Kyla Stone (Anya), Lauren Teyke (ensemble), Gerri Weagraff (Dowager Empress). *Alternating performances

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