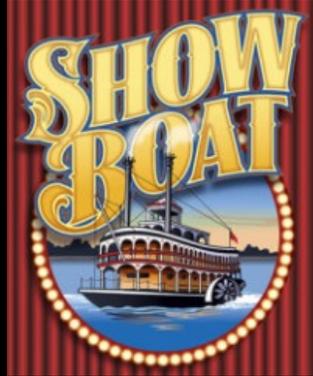


Show Boat – Theatre Review: Arizona Broadway Theatre, Peoria

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It was the first of its kind. A play with music and song, where the songs propelled the plot instead of stopping it. So, in 1927, when the Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein II musical in two acts, **Show Boat** opened on Broadway, the course of the American musical theatre was changed forever. With that in mind, watching any new production of **Show Boat** is like witnessing a further chapter in the on-going history of this truly great musical.

Since its premiere, even though the arc of the story always remains the same, significant changes have occurred. The original show ran for just over four and a half hours, but depending on when and where a revised production was performed, edits were made, songs were either cut or moved around, the overture continually changed, and some characters slightly altered. Also, because of the show's themes of race, segregation, Jim Crow laws, plus betrayal, and enduring love, depending upon what part of the country the show was playing, certain segments and subplots sensitive to the area were removed altogether. In its way, it's fair to say that each new production you'll see is unique, including the new production from **Arizona Broadway Theatre** in Peoria, now in performance until February 10.



Based on the lengthy, sprawling novel by Edna Ferber, who really did her homework when researching riverboat life, the story revolves around the lives of the performers, the crew, and the workers of the Mississippi River show boat, **Cotton Blossom**, helmed by Cap'n Andy (an affable Mark Tumeay) and his

wife, Parthy (a suitably stern Gerri Weagraff). It spans a period of more than forty years, from 1887 to 1927, which, at the time of the show's opening, would have brought the story up to present-day.

Its original director, impresario and producer of the **Ziegfeld Follies**, plus a slew of musical revues, Florenz Ziegfeld, took a career risk by producing Broadway's first musical play, but there were safety nets. If there's one thing Broadway loves, it's stories about itself. By developing a production with a foundation built on tales of showbiz, variety, and music hall, there remained a certain amount of audience familiarity built in to the narrative. **Show Boat** may have seemed a radical departure for something presented under the name of Ziegfeld, but there was much within the production that gave the man, known as '*The Glorifier of the American Girl*,' an opportunity to deliver the kind of glittering spectacle for which he was famous.



There's a timeless quality to the score that makes each of the songs as deeply affecting as they were when first heard. On her famous **Broadway** album, Barbra Streisand talked of singing songs that were meant to be sung. That may seem like an obvious thing to say, but knowing she was referring to those great Hammerstein lyrics, you're aware of what she meant. The **Show Boat** score needs to be heard, and it's here where the **ABT** cast do the musical justice.

Throughout, there are fine renditions of the classics. **Make Believe**, **Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man**, and the fun **Life Upon the Wicked Stage** are all highlights. But what strikes you with this production, more than anything else, is the quality of the voices. The singing is impressive in all areas. Lacy Sauter as Julie performs an emotionally charged **Bill**, while Jamie Parnell as Gaylord and Brittany Santos as Magnolia get the second act tone to **Why Do I Love You** just right.



But the heart of the score, the song that needs to be solid on all fronts, is **O! Man River**. Without it, the show falls upon itself; it *has* to be right. Described in the program as a Basso Cantante, a singer possessing a bass voice with a developed upper range, Earl Hazell as Joe delivers the score's best known song. Lyrically, **O! Man River** equates the flow of the mighty Mississippi to the never-ending hardships of daily life for the African American worker. It expresses the thoughts and feelings of the black dockworker while giving insight to the toil and trouble of a hardworking, everyday, backbreaking existence. Yet while it furthers character, it also stops the show. When Hazell takes center stage for the final line of the song, he points, reaches out, clutches his fist, then yanks it sharply back, bringing the song to a passionate and affecting close. Going forward, who needs to hear **O! Man River** sung any other way?



Director and choreographer Jim Christian's **Arizona Broadway Theatre** production runs just over two hours, plus intermission, and incorporates every theme that was ever intended. There are cuts to what you may have seen before – the ensemble is understandably smaller, making the crowds appear leaner than usual, plus the second half feels extremely fragmented; a result of a show that was once more than four hours, cut to two – but the **Show Boat** you'll see on the wide **ABT** stage remains hugely entertaining; a production bursting with energy and color, performed by a cast full of rich, harmonious voices all working together in a way that makes those wonderful Jerome Kern melodies and Oscar Hammerstein lyrics take flight.

Pictures Courtesy of **Scott Samplin**

Show Boat continues at Arizona Broadway Theatre in Peroria until February 10

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