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Show Boat

Arizona Broadway Theatre

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When *Show Boat* premiered in 1927 it was hailed as a landmark musical of the time, as it was one of the first shows to successfully combine both comedy and drama with a story that featured a wide range of characters, including parts played by both white and African-American actors. It was the first time, I believe, that both white and black actors appeared in a show together where their roles were all paramount to the plot. Also, every musical that came before was either a light operetta, including the musicals from Gilbert & Sullivan, or a musical revue such as the Ziegfeld Follies, while *Show Boat* focused on such serious topics as racism, addiction and abandonment.



Jamie Parnell and Brittany Santos (center) and Cast

Photo by Scott Samplin

Based on Edna Ferber's epic best-selling novel, composer Jerome Kern and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II combined light operetta melodies with soaring harmonies, spirituals, comic numbers, and what would become several romantic standards in a way that had never been seen before. In that regard, *Show Boat*, with the combination of all of these new ideas for a musical, was almost like the *Hamilton* of its time in that it completely changed the way the musical art form was and would ever be again. It's a bit odd that, with how groundbreaking this show was, and how the topics it covers are still relevant, that it seems so rarely produced today.

With a cast who expertly embody their characters and whose voices deliver some stunning vocals on the show's

many classic songs, Arizona Broadway Theatre presents a slightly scaled down and edited version of this groundbreaking show, providing a beautiful production of this rarely produced American musical classic.

Featuring a large ensemble cast of characters, the story of *Show Boat* begins in the 1880s and spans 40 years. It follows the lives and loves of three generations aboard a show boat called the Cotton Blossom as it moves down the Mississippi River, entertaining locals in small cities as it makes stops along its journey. The main plot follows the romance of Magnolia, the daughter of the friendly proprietor of the Cotton Blossom, Cap'n Andy, and his stern wife Parthy, as she falls for the dashing riverboat gambler Gaylord Ravenal. The story then moves forward in time as Magnolia and Gaylord, and several other show boat performers, move to Chicago while the show boat's cook Queenie and her dock worker husband Joe portray the plight of African Americans at the time. With the standards "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," "Make Believe," "Bill," and "O! Man River," the musical features glorious music combined with a charming, romantic, sentimental and heartbreaking story.

ABT's cast, under Jim Christian's focused direction, deliver clear and distinct portrayals of their characters. From romantic teenager to headstrong woman, Brittany Santos expertly depicts the changes Magnolia goes through the course of the show. As Gaylord Ravenal, Jamie Parnell's dashing demeanor, swagger and beautiful singing voice make it easy to see why Magnolia immediately falls in love with him. Santos and Parnell deliver some of the score's most romantic songs, including "Make Believe" and "You are Love" with a beautiful clarity through rich performances that infuse Hammerstein's lyrics with meaning.

Like oil and vinegar, Mark Tumey and Gerri Weagraff do well as the couple who couldn't be more opposite in their dealings with others, the affable Cap'n Andy and the always doubting Parthy, while Lauren Paley and Tyler Pirrung, as the boat's comical, dancing duo Ellie May and Frank, provide several moments of upbeat levity. As Joe, Earl Hazell's soaring voice ensures that his many reprises of "O! Man River" are highlights, including the addition of lush harmonies he shares with members of the ensemble under Josh D. Smith's excellent music direction. As Joe's wife Queenie, Anne-Lise Koyabe delivers a beautiful characterization of this warm and wise woman. Her solo of "Mis'ry's Comin' Aroun'" is gorgeous. Lacy Sauter's performance of Julie, another performer on the boat who suffers much tragedy throughout the show, is infused with the refined realism of a woman who makes a sacrifice to help ensure her friend's future, with a voice that soars on both "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" and her solo "Bill." In smaller parts, Cody Gerszewski is quite good as Julie's faithful husband Steve, and ensemble members Tony Blosser and Meggie Siegrist also play two pivotal characters with assurance.

Christian's period choreography is well danced by the ensemble, while Douglas Clarke's set design features a small but serviceable mock-up of the Cotton Blossom and a few other set elements to depict the other settings of the show. Lottie Dixon's costumes and Amanda Gran's hair and make-up designs deliver bright, colorful recreations of the period. However, as good as the cast and direction are, the small size of the ensemble and the simplicity of the set design do detract somewhat from the epic scale of the musical.

Full of spectacle, soaring songs, and an abundance of romance and optimism amongst sadness, *Show Boat* is an important milestone in the history of the American musical. With a cast that is just about perfect and themes that still resonate today, Arizona Broadway Theatre's *Show Boat* is a beautiful, though somewhat small scale, production of an old-fashioned musical classic.

Show Boat, through February 10th, 2018, at Arizona Broadway Theatre, 7701 West Paradise Lane in Peoria AZ. Tickets can be ordered at www.azbroadway.org or by calling 623-776-8400.

Music by Jerome Kern

Book and Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, based on the novel by Edna Ferber

Direction and Choreography: Jim Christian

Music Direction: Josh D. Smith

Set Design: Douglas Clarke

Lighting Design: William Kirkham

Costume Design: Lottie Dixon

Wig/Makeup Design: Amanda Gran

Executive Producer: Kiel Klaphake

Casting and Artistic Producer: Cassandra Klaphake

Cast:

Cap'n Andy: Mark Tumej

Ellie May Shipley: Lauren Paley

Frank Schultz: Tyler Pirrung

Parthy Ann Hawks: Gerri Weagraff

Julie Laverne: Lacy Sauter

Queenie: Anne-Lise Koyabe

Gaylord Ravenal: Jamie Parnell

Magnolia Hawks: Brittany Santos

Joe: Earl Hazell

Kim, child: Mia Hurley

Kim, child: Lila Shipley

Steve Baker: Cody Gerszewski

 Gavin / Jeb: Matthew Ruff

oy / Jim Greene: Tony Blosser

Sheriff Ike Vallon: Christopher Cody Cooley

Charlie: John Knispel

Stevedore: Leon Glover

Stevedore: Marc-Anthony Lewis

Stevedore: Claxton Rabb III

Lottie / Town Girl: Renée Kathleen Koher

Dottie / Town Girl: Kara Ziringer

Kim, adult / Town Girl: Ashley Nicole Martin

Mrs. O'Brien / Mother Superior: Meggie Siegrist

Stevedore's Gal: Shaunice Alexander

Stevedore's Gal: Blair Beasley

Stevedore's Gal: Juliana Desai-Parsons

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