

Review: Theatre Reviews Limited

“Reunion”

by Jack Kyrieleison and Ron Holgate

At Theatre Row Theatre

Reviewed by David Roberts for Theatre Reviews Limited

The American Civil War left behind wounds which have still not completely healed. There never was a true re-union of North and South, politically, psychologically, or geographically. And if the focal point of that bloody struggle was the abolition of slavery, our legacy of racism belies the heroic efforts of our mid-nineteenth century sisters and brothers who struggled on battlefields and in factories to resolve our deep and divisive differences.

One story of that struggle and its aftermath is the new musical “Reunion” which is currently running at the Theatre Row Theatre. This AMAS Musical Theatre production claims to be “a Civil War epic in miniature” designed as a Victorian-era entertainment as it might have been told by a nineteenth century Homer and a wandering company of actors. Although this musical never reaches the poetic level of either the “Iliad” or the “Odyssey,” it does embody the proper subject of an epic and has some epic qualities of its own.

The talented cast of “Reunion” portrays an 1890 acting troupe which earns its passage by enacting the history of the Civil War. Making an unexpected stop in a “backwater town,” the troupe’s actor-manager Harry Hawk (Joe Barrett) and his six actors take on a range of roles, including President Lincoln’s secretary, General George McClellan, John Wilkes Booth, freed slaves (one a woman who becomes the seamstress and confidant to Mrs. Lincoln), a volunteer nurse, a temperance advocate, a music hall comedian, and Union and Confederate soldiers. Book writer Jack Kyrieleison has researched an incredible number of literary sources while preparing to write the dialogue for “Reunion” and the results of his labors are a story-line which is both authentic and surreal.

In addition to the dialogue, there are “Reunion’s” some twenty-seven songs, all of them authentic topical music pieces by period composers including Stephen Foster (“Comrades, Fill No Glass for Me”), Henry Clay Work (“Wake Nicodemus”), and George F. Root (“Battle Cry of Freedom”) performed live by a five-piece band.

The result of all of this effort by “Reunion’s” creative and production team is a visually and musically stunning piece of theatre. The cast couldn’t be better vocally. Whether singing as a company or as individuals, these vocalists are superb. Much of this is attributable not only to their significant vocal talents but to the outstanding work of musical arranger Michael O’Flaherty. His arrangements of William B. Bradbury’s “Marching Along” and Ethel L. Beer’s/John Hill Hewitt’s “All Quiet Along the Potomac” are nothing less than brilliant. Joe Barrett shines in Stephen Foster’s “Hard Times Come Again No More.” Harriett D. Foy (Mrs. Cassie Drumwright) and Michael A. Shepperd (Mr. Hannibal Drumwright) bring their formidable vocal ranges to bear in Stephen Foster’s “Better Times Are Coming” and the traditional “Steal Away.” Don Burroughs (Mr. Tom Trudgett), Donna Lynne Champlin (Miss Cordelia Hopewell) and Jonathan Hadley (Mr. Augustin Lovecraft) bring new meaning to James Sloan Gibbons’/L. O. Emerson’s “We Are Coming, Father Abr’am” with their trio of clear, bright voices. The five-piece band works Michael O’Flaherty’s arrangements of the traditional period music to almost perfection with the help of Andrew Wilder’s thoughtful orchestrations. “Reunion” is also a visual delight. Doug Hustzi’s set serves

as “backwater town” and vaudeville stage. Jan Finnell’s period costumes are full of amazing detail and exemplary color. And Stephen Petrilli’s lighting design completes the visual palate with perfect color choice and intensity.

Director Ron Holgate pulls all of these talented performers and creative team members to form a “Reunion” which almost succeeds one hundred percent. However, the epic quality of each segment of this production does not quite a true Epic make, even in miniature. What’s missing here (and this surely can be fixed) is a sense that Mr. Harry Hawk’s players care about the women and men they are portraying. Somehow all the songs and all dialogue falls just short of giving the audience the spirit of the struggle and the participants in that struggle. And this is clearly not the result of any shortcomings on the part of the members of the cast. The audience needs to be able to get beneath the myth of the characters to the very heart and soul of each of these participants in one of America’s most significant dramas. This “breakthrough” might occur if we saw more interaction between Hawk’s troupe as they set up a scene or move in some props. Perhaps we need to see them talking about the characters they are portraying. It would also be helpful if the whole piece could be tightened up to a two hour length.

The New York premiere of “Reunion” is a musical and visual success which lets the audience “lift the curtain” on one of the most compelling dramas in American History. With some additional work in staging, this musical could be the Epic Jack Kyrieleison has so gracefully and generously brought to this significant and worthwhile level. Bravo! And, march on.

Reviewed on Tuesday, April 7, 1999 (Opened on Monday, April 5, 1999)

“REUNION” A MUSICAL EPIC IN MINIATURE

Book by Jack Kyrieleison. Story by Jack Kyrieleison and Ron Holgate. Traditional music arranged by Michael O’Flaherty. Directed by Ron Holgate. Set design by Doug Hustzi; costume design by Jan Finnell; lighting design by Stephen Petrilli; production stage manager, Carlos A. Monge III; orchestrations by Andrew Wilder; musical staging by Roberts Lamont. Presented by AMAS Musical Theatre at Theatre Row Theatre, 424 West 42nd Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues. All tickets are \$15.00 (student and senior discount, \$12.00) and are available by calling Ticket Central at 212-279-4200.

WITH: Joe Barrett (Harry Hawk), Don Burroughs (Tom Trudget), Donna Lynne Champlin (Cordelia), Harriett D. Foy (Cassie Drumwright), Jonathan Hadley (Augustin Lovecraft), and Michael A. Shepperd (Hannibal Drumwright).

Musicians: Robert Lamont (Musical Director/Piano), Joseph Brady (Percussion), Robert Braunstein (Guitar-Banjo), Cody Ritchey (Violin) and Dan Yeager (Trumpet).