

THEATER

Review: ‘An American in Paris,’ a Romance of Song and Step NYT Critics’ Pick

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD APRIL 12, 2015

The city of light is ablaze with movement in the rhapsodic new stage adaptation of “An American in Paris” that opened at the Palace Theater on Sunday, directed and choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon, a gifted luminary of the ballet world. This gorgeously danced — and just plain gorgeous — production pays loving tribute to the 1951 movie, to the marriage of music and movement, and to cherished notions about romance that have been a defining element of the American musical theater practically since its inception. Just about everything in this happily dance-drunk show moves with a spring in its step, as if the newly liberated Paris after World War II were an enchanted place in which the laws of gravity no longer applied. Even the elegant buildings on the grand boulevards appear to take flight.

Musicals based on classic movies, or not-so-classic movies, have become a familiar staple on Broadway. Just last week, “Gigi,” another show based on an Oscar-winning MGM movie set in Paris — also featuring a screenplay by Alan Jay Lerner — opened a few blocks away. Dance, on the other hand, has become the wallflower at the Broadway prom in recent decades, which makes Mr. Wheeldon’s triumph all the sweeter.

Still, unlike the shows directed and choreographed by Twyla Tharp —

“Movin’ Out” being the most successful — “An American in Paris” is very much a traditional Broadway musical, with a book by the playwright Craig Lucas that amplifies the movie’s thin story line, mostly to witty and vivifying effect. And while its two radiant leading performers, Robert Fairchild and Leanne Cope, are ballet dancers by profession, they also sing (quite well) and deliver dialogue (more than quite well).

An almost equal collaborator with Mr. Wheeldon and Mr. Lucas is the great designer Bob Crowley, who provides both the sets and costumes, and whose work here outshines anything currently on Broadway in its blend of elegance, wit and sophistication. With its shimmering, poetic renderings of one of the world’s most beautiful cities — boats floating in the Seine awash in starlight, pink clouds scudding over the rooftops at dusk — the musical is as rich a visual feast as it is a musical one.

Speaking of music, by now I should probably have tipped my hat to the artist who inspired all this affectionate invention: George Gershwin, whose songbook and concert compositions provide the whirring engine that drives all the exuberant motion onstage. (Not incidentally, the music has been adapted and arranged with incomparable finesse by Rob Fisher, the founding music director of the Encores! series.) As in the movie, the titular composition is employed for the show’s climactic ballet, but the musical also includes a good dozen Gershwin tunes, classics and rarities alike (“The Man I Love,” but also “Fidgety Feet”), most newly interpolated into the story.

This begins just after the Nazis have been routed, although the shadow of the occupation still hangs over the city in the opening scenes. Mr. Crowley paints the streets in grisaille compositions that suggest flagging spirits just beginning to revive, and Mr. Wheeldon depicts Parisians standing sullenly in bread lines, or descending angrily on a collaborator.

Jerry Mulligan, the ex-G.I. portrayed by Mr. Fairchild, is an avid witness to the city’s reawakening. An aspiring painter, he drinks in everything he sees with bright, inquisitive eyes, and the joy that springs from his new sense of freedom is translated into ebullient movement. A principal dancer with New York City Ballet (who, incidentally, is used to dancing to Gershwin in George

Balanchine's "Who Cares"), Mr. Fairchild has exemplary classical technique, but he also possesses some of the earthy sensuality that Gene Kelly brought to his dancing. (Nor does it hurt that he's movie-star handsome.)

Jerry's turns and leaps gain velocity when he captures glimpses of a beautiful brunette, Lise Dassin (Ms. Cope), slipping quietly through the streets of Paris with a concentrated expression. By coincidence — O.K., by sheer contrivance — Jerry and Lise are brought together when Jerry's pal, the aspiring composer Adam Hochberg (a dryly funny **Brandon Uranowitz**), invites Jerry to sketch dancers at the ballet, where he works as a rehearsal pianist. Lise, it turns out, is a dancer who earns a living as a shopgirl. (In the movie, Leslie Caron just sold perfume.)

Also in attendance at this audition is Milo Davenport (Jill Paice), an American heiress who promptly whips out her checkbook and persuades the ballet impresario to commission Adam to compose a score for a new ballet to star Lise, whose sinuous movement and intuitive connection to the music dazzles just about everyone. And why shouldn't Jerry, who has caught Milo's lovelorn eye, create the designs?

Yes, this development has more than a whiff of hokum about it, but once this hurdle is leapt, the musical charges ahead like a swift horse in a steeplechase, with one vibrant song or dance number following another in heady succession. Jerry woos a diffident Lise at the department store where she works to the jaunty "I've Got Beginner's Luck" (with a winking nod to "Singin' in the Rain" as umbrellas twirl) and later jokingly suggests she drop her French name when she's in his company, to the tune of "Liza." With each new meeting, Jerry and Lise draw closer, as expressed by the increasing intricacy and intimacy of the steps Mr. Wheeldon creates for them, classically based but imbued with a subliminal sexuality.

As in the movie, Lise's reluctance to admit her attraction to Jerry stems from her allegiance to another man to whom she is attached: Henri Baurel, the heir to a textile fortune who secretly aspires to be a nightclub singer. (Just about all the characters in the show aspire to something, which may be viewed as a beloved showbiz cliché or an expression of the spirit of hope sweeping

over Europe after the dark days of war.)

Henri is portrayed by Max von Essen, a gifted actor with several Broadway credits who here gives a hard-earned breakthrough performance of great sensitivity and charm. Although Mr. Fairchild and Ms. Cope have fine voices, Mr. von Essen's rich tenor is in another class. In one of the splashier numbers, "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise," a small jazz club blooms into Radio City Music Hall, replete with a high-kicking chorus line, as Henri's fantasies carry him away. (Mr. von Essen, who uses a French accent, like the other actors portraying Parisians, at times brought to mind the great French tenor Léopold Simoneau.)

Mr. Lucas's book can sometimes get a little jambon-handed, if you will, when it insists on giving some ballast to Lerner's featherweight story. Henri's mother, played with droll imperiousness by Veanne Cox, asks if perhaps Henri's hesitance to propose to Lise may derive from his homosexuality. Jerry, Adam and Henri engage in the occasional argument about whether art should reflect life's darkness or dissipate it.

But while these elements occasionally feel like dutiful attempts to inject contemporary gravitas into a nostalgically romantic musical, they certainly do not bring this airborne show down to earth for long. Mr. Wheeldon's buoyant dances and the heat-generating performances infuse the evening with the headlong energy of youth in the process of self-discovery, through love, through art or, for those left without dance partners when the curtain falls, through loss.

But why conclude on a blue note? "An American in Paris" weds music and movement, song and story with such exhilarating brio that you may find your own feet fidgeting under your seat before it's over, and your heart alight with a longing to be swept up in the dance.

An American in Paris

Music and lyrics by George Gershwin and Ira Gershwin; book by Craig Lucas, inspired by the motion picture; directed and choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon; musical score adapted, arranged and supervised by Rob Fisher; sets and costumes by Bob Crowley; lighting by Natasha Katz; sound by Jon Weston;

projections by 59 Productions; company manager, Rina L. Saltzman; production stage manager, Rick Steiger; production supervisor, Jake Bell; music director, Brad Haak; music supervisor, Todd Ellison; orchestrations by Christopher Austin; dance arrangements by Sam Davis; music coordinator, Seymour Red Press; additional orchestrations by Don Sebesky and Bill Elliott; associate directors, Jacquelin Barrett and Dontee Kiehn; associate choreographer, Ms. Kiehn; general manager, 101 Productions, Ltd.; associate producers, Gloria Gracia Alanis, Amuse Inc., Lun-Yun Chang and Ivy Zhong/Sean Hsu. Presented by Stuart Oken, Van Kaplan, Roy Furman, Stephanie P. McClelland, Darren Bagert, Carole L. Haber, James Nederlander, Five Cent Productions, Michael Leavitt, Apples and Oranges Studios/Dominion Pictures, Roger Berlind/Arch Road, Simone Genatt Haft/Marc Routh, Triptyk Studios/Spencer Ross, Ed Walson/Peter May, Adam Zotovich/Celia Atkin, Eugene Beard/Julie Boardman/Kallish-Weinstein, Stuart Ditsky/Jim Herbert/Sandy Robertson, Suzanne Friedman/Independent Presenters Network/Wonderful Productions, the Leonore S. Gershwin 1987 Trust/Jenkins-Taylor/Proctors, Harriet Newman Leve/Jane Dubin/Sarahbeth Grossman and Caiola Productions/Jennifer Isaacson/Raise the Curtain, by special arrangement with Elephant Eye Theatrical & Pittsburgh CLO and Théâtre du Châtelet. At the Palace Theater, 1564 Broadway, at 47th Street; 877-250-2929, ticketmaster.com. Open run. Running time: 2 hours 30 minutes.

WITH: Robert Fairchild (Jerry Mulligan), Leanne Cope (Lise Dassin), Veanne Cox (Madame Baurel), Jill Paice (Milo Davenport), Brandon Uranowitz (Adam Hochberg), Max von Essen (Henri Baurel), Scott Willis (Monsieur Baurel), Victor J. Wisheart (Mr. Z) and Rebecca Eichenberger (Olga).

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