

***Lucky Stiff***

**Astoria Performing Arts Center**

**Astoria, NY - February 2005**

**Reviewed by John Kenrick**

Something funny's going on in Queens -- and praise be to the theatrical gods for it!

Queens has been home to thousands of theatre pros and countless theatre lovers -- it is now (finally!) home to a great professional theatre company. **The Astoria Performing Arts Center (APAC)** has been offering Equity showcase productions for the past four years, and is now playing to packed, enthusiastic houses. While attending their current staging of *Lucky Stiff*, I was surrounded by fellow locals, as well as people from New Jersey and even upstate New York. Why the fuss? Simple -- APAC offers quality theatre at very affordable prices. Hey, if you put on the good stuff, people will come!

*Lucky Stiff* is definitely good stuff. As one of the first musicals written by lyricist-librettist Lynn Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty, this quirky show has developed a small but dedicated cult of fans. The plot couldn't be more off the wall -- a young man is set to inherit six million dollars if he agrees to take his late uncle's corpse on an all-expenses paid vacation to Monte Carlo. Others vying for this juicy inheritance soon turn the trip into an all-out comic melee, leading to romance and more than a few surprises.

This kind of zany material can fizzle in the wrong hands, but director **Brian Swasey** keeps his cast tuned to exactly the right comic pitch, winning every laugh. Yes, one or two scene changes may drag a bit, and some accents are more consistent than others, but the overall pace and the solid charm of the cast more than make up for any minor quibbles. Swasey knows how to pick capable actors, point them in the right direction, and then trust them to run with the ball -- and run they do!

**Ron DeStefano** has wholesome looks and breezy charm as the impoverished young man showing his uncle's corpse a good time and dreaming of a fortune. **Amanda Ryan Paige** is an real charmer as the girl out to claim that same fortune for a struggling dog shelter -- her rendition of the disarming "At Times Like This" is a sweet highlight. As a murderous mafia mistress, **Laura Daniel** keeps the audience roaring with powerhouse vocals and a gift for broad comedy, and **T.J. D'Angelo** wins major laughs as her long-suffering brother. The solid ensemble handles a myriad of smaller roles with real flair, so kudos to the multi-talented **Susan Wilson, Greg Horton, Tommy Labanaris, Darren Rozumek, Adrienne Asterita, Michelle Doucet** and (as the long suffering corpse) **Howard Brewer Jr.** It is a tribute to this entire cast that every line was easy to hear -- oh the joy of reveling in the unamplified human voice, the glory of pure theatre!

The sets by **Marie Lynn Wagner** are simple and effective, **Kristine Koury's** costumes are right on target, as are some inventive dog masks by **Holly Lehman.** **Niklas Anderson** keeps the expansive stage area deftly lit, while musical director **Jeffrey Campos** and his small orchestra provide flawless accompaniment throughout. There are damn few theatre companies that can turn out such an entertaining, professional evening on the tightest of budgets -- so three cheers to all concerned!

Many musical theatre buffs have admired *Lucky Stiff* on CD -- well, you have no idea how much fun this show is until you see it in action. APAC's production is set to run through February 27th, so grab an N train to Broadway, indulge in some of the fabulous local ethnic cuisine, and treat yourself to more fun than anything currently running in Midtown Manhattan!