



Review: The Gallery Players Are Having A Wild Party!

Review by John Delamar

Welcome to the roaring twenties. Kander and Ebb said, “There’s booze everywhere, jazz everywhere, men everywhere...” And Andrew Lippa said it was a “Wild, wild party”, and it was. Brooklyn’s own Gallery Players, making great theatre Off Broadway for forty-one years, have brought Lippa’s wild and crazy twenties back to life in a production of *The Wild Party* to write home about. The Gallery Players have never been one to shy away from issues that verge on the profane, and this indulgent

musical about the golden age of American prohibition is no exception.

The *Wild Party*, based on the book length poem, by Joseph Moncure March, chronicles the adventures and misadventures of a group of vaudevillians one night. The story centers around Queenie, a vixen of the vaudeville stage, a temptress, who is looking for something more than her live in boyfriend, Burrs. The two decide that after three years they should, finally, have a party, with a guest list including the life of the party, Kate, who has drug along a mysterious new face, Mr. Black. With all the pawns in place, Queenie, is ready to end her life with Burrs, except, only problem is one of the party guests will lose their life.

With a deconstructed set, the musical plays itself out with one of the most amazingly fluid ensemble casts seen in the past season. These consummate hoofers make their way from high octane thrills to the lowest of heartstring pulling lows. Each character stepping up to bat with a story all their own, and musical numbers to blow your socks off. There is an undertone running through Neal Freeman’s interpretation, an undertone of sorrow and impending doom. Even John Eckert’s lighting design promises a darker night than anyone expected. Foot lights shining directly into actor’s faces bring the glory of the vaudeville days home, but with a twist of the macabre. Eerie, half clothed figures sing out “Queenie was a Blonde”, and move the show through it’s paces, much like a Greek chorus, from hell.

A technical aspect that is well worth it’s own weight in gold is the choreography of Brian Swasey, who has captured the beauty and gaiety of pre-Depression movement and grizzled disjointed palpitations. Swasey enraptures the audience with numbers like “The Juggernaut”, and makes us feel ill at ease with sensuous gyrations of “Come With Me”. The skill with which the ensemble’s bodies are orchestrated illuminates the talent of their choreographer.

Standing out from her fellow ensemble with a song to be remembered hours past the production (“An Old Fashioned Love Story”), Tauren Hagans is a star in her own right, on her way to making her mark on the Great White Way, if their is justice in the world. Unfortunately for the actor’s a lot of the subtleties of their performances were lost, the music swelling well above their voices. Nicole Sterling, Queenie, who’s performance, when it could be heard, was exceptional, lacing what are considered to be some of the show’s more aggressive belt numbers with nuances of sotto voce. Kate, Julie Cardia, came balls to wall with “Take a Look at Me Now”, but lost some of her steam with the show’s rousing if oddly placed, anthem “The Life of the Party”. It seems that both actor and director, Mr. Freeman, were looking for a performance different from that of Idina Menzel, the show’s original Kate, but fell short of the songs full potential. It is my humble opinion that could out act Ms Menzel, without question, her performance was layered and deep, for a character that could come off as less than two dimensional. Jonathan Hack, Burrs, brought to the table what seemed to be Mandy Patinkin. His performance resonated with stylings that were not originally intended for Mr Lippa, but for John Michael LaChuisa, and bravo for that. The only truly disappointing performance from the lot was that of the un-debonair and lack luster Mr. Black, Michael Jones. The heart and soul of “Poor Child” was not there. It was a mere showcase piece, as if to say look and listen to my pretty voice.

What the Gallery Players have given to theatre audiences is a gem of a musical. They have stayed true to their mission of showcasing burgeoning talent and continuing to push the limits of the Off-Broadway theatre. *The Wild Party* is akin to a good bathroom whiskey, it burns, it warms you, and you walk away with one helluva buzz.