

Theater

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Reviews

Turn of the Century

FAN FICTION
Century's ensemble waves 'em like they just don't care.



★★★★★

Goodman Theatre (see Resident companies). Book by Marshall Brickman and Rick Elice. Dir. Tommy Tune. With Jeff Daniels, Rachel York.

Marshall Brickman and Rick Elice come to bury the American songbook, not to praise it. And it seems the Goodman is more than pleased to foot the bill.

Brickman and Elice's new jukebox musical is probably the most expensively tacky show to (dis)grace a Chicago stage since *The Pirate Queen*. Billy (Daniels), a caddish, womanizing piano player, and Dixie (York), a down-on-her-luck singer with an encyclopedic knowledge of song lyrics, meet cute at a tony New York City party on New Year's Eve 1999, a week or two after they met hot-and-sweaty at another party.

Then, suddenly and without explanation, they find themselves transported back in time a hundred years. After about 30 seconds of sussing out the situation, Billy realizes that between them, he and Dixie know all the

great 20th-century songs that have yet to be written, and the two go into business passing the music off as their own. Within a week, they're major stars. (They also meet an ultrasanitized 12-year-old Irving Berlin. Brickman and Elice treat the composer with as much dignity as they do his work: not much.)

And so we get what we presumably came for: a hundred years of popular music as vaudeville. There's nothing wrong per se with repurposing pop songs. Baz Luhrmann used Madonna, Paul McCartney and Elton John to great effect in *Moulin Rouge*. Nor is there anything inherently evil about the jukebox musical. Ken Ludwig interpolated the Gershwin brothers' music into an affectionate, appropriate throwback musical in 1992's *Crazy for You*. Even Brickman and Elice's prior collaboration, the Four Seasons biospectacle *Jersey Boys*, uses the music of Frankie Valli, Bob Gaudio and pals respectfully.

Turn of the Century, on the other hand, openly disrespects both the music it appropriates and the musical-

theater form it approximates. Where *Jersey Boys* uses, in its stilted manner, the Seasons' music to tell a story (even if it's a story we already know), *Century* uses the great pop songs of the 20th century as the butts of anachronistic jokes. A sextet of corseted chorines chirps "I Am Woman." Billy retrofits Prince's "1999" for a scandalized 1899 audience. Early-century tabloid magnet Evelyn Nesbit croons "Moon River" from her swing.

Quibblers could note that Nesbit wouldn't become a household name until some years after this show's 1900 setting and that other lowest-common-denominator gags, such as a cheap shot at Celine Dion's Las Vegas act, don't fit the timeline, either. (Celine's heart didn't go on to Vegas until 2003. And I can't believe I'm defending her.)

In divorcing the music from its social context, Brickman and Elice do a disservice to the pop-music tradition. In real life, songs like "Twisted," "My Way" and even "God Bless America" come from, and speak to, their specific times and places. *Century* uses music as

currency but has no interest in the currency of music. (It also displays little interest, both in its musical history and its casting, in things that aren't white.)

I can't help but pause here to wonder about the Goodman's involvement in shepherding this offensive, expensive slip of a show to Broadway (the creators haven't been shy about their intentions). Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of New York's Public Theater, told *Playbill* recently that legendary composer Stephen Sondheim merited the Public's upcoming production of *Road Show* because he "deserves to be produced in New York." *Road Show* previously appeared, and failed, at the Goodman under the title *Bounce*, but I get Eustis's sentiment. The Goodman's productions this decade of Kander and Ebb's *The Visit* and Arthur Miller's *Finishing the Picture* seem to fall under the same umbrella: They're presumably the last works of some of the greatest voices of American theater, and attention must be paid, even if they're not any good.

But Brickman and Elice aren't legends. They're coasting on a single, very commercial success with *Jersey Boys*, and *Turn of the Century* is an utter embarrassment. It was awkward to watch the unaccomplished *Finishing the Picture* in the same audience as Miller, but I still understood why the Goodman took up its mantle. Here, it's impossible not to question the judgment of the Goodman and artistic director Bob Falls. By putting its distinguished seal of approval on safe, for-profit rubbish, Chicago's most powerful nonprofit theater shirks its responsibility.

Director Tune seems to be on autopilot. Scenic designer Walt Spangler has concentrated his efforts on an ugly, distracting LCD news ticker that's outdone by the ABC-7 studio around the block. And Daniels, a fine film actor, overplays every moment, mugging as if he hopes to be seen from space.

Watching skilled Chicago actors like Kevin Gudahl, Rebecca Finnegan, James Rank and Tommy Rapley fake their way through this is painful. But the most excruciating to see is York, a Broadway trouper for nearly two decades with a divine voice and charm to spare, who's due for a real breakthrough. York, the various songwriters and us mugs in the audience all deserve better than we get from this cynical exercise.—*Kris Vire*

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