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A Singing Duo Hoping for “The Big Time” Must Save a Ship Ferrying NATO; McCarter Concert Continues Princeton Pops Series with Musical Comedy



“THE BIG TIME”: Directed by librettist Douglas Carter Beane, and conducted by Fred Lassen, “The Big Time” was presented January 31 at McCarter’s Matthews Theatre. The cast included, from left, Michael McCormick, Jackie Hoffman, Bradley Dean, Raymond Bokhour, Will Swenson, Laura Osnes, Santino Fontana, and Debbie Gravitte. *(Photo by Tom Miller)*

By Donald H. Sanborn III

During a scene in *The Big Time* a prim British diplomat, Penelope Briggs-Hopkins, stiffly asserts that she is “not a fan of musical comedy.” She would disapprove of the musical in which she is a character; *The Big Time* is an unabashedly cheerful comedy, in the style of *Hello, Dolly!* or *The Producers*.

A concert performance of *The Big Time* was presented January 31, to an enthusiastic audience that filled McCarter's Matthews Theatre. The event was the second installment of the Princeton Pops series, a new collaboration between McCarter and the Princeton Symphony Orchestra.

The show's witty book is by Douglas Carter Beane, and the sprightly, memorable songs are by Douglas J. Cohen. The lyrics, which match the tone of Beane's dialogue, have been set to music that evokes the big band era, as well as the sly saxophone-infused sound of a 1960s spy movie. Cohen's well-crafted score establishes the characters' personalities, while taking advantage of the performers' vocal ranges.

Music director Fred Lassen opened the show by leading a band, formed by 16 members of the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, in a crisp rendition of the overture, which established the jaunty musical style. The orchestrations favor the drums, saxophones, and brass; however, the flute and clarinet stand out in other numbers.

In a program note Beane relates that the show originated as a screenplay for Oliver Stone. The plot was crafted to parody the film *Under Siege* (1992), in which mercenaries, posing as caterers and led by an ex-CIA operative, hijack a battleship.

The central characters in Beane's version are a struggling duo of singers, Tony and Donna. At the beginning of the show they are performing at a lounge in 1960s Atlantic City ("Vegas for people who are afraid to fly," a character quips while establishing the scene). Donna and Tony are not married, but they pretend to be, for the sake of publicity.

Debbie Gravitte, who exuberantly played Donna, is an expressive belter. The early numbers for Donna tend to start in the middle of Gravitte's range, and move up to her trumpet-like upper register, occasionally reaching down to her lower notes, which have a purr-like quality.

"I Could Get Used to That" is an early standout number for Donna. It is what musical theater writers would classify as an "I want" song, letting the character express her dissatisfaction with the way her professional and personal life with Tony is progressing. "Playing the slots with the haves and have-nots? I know this is not where it's at," she gripes.

To the role of Tony, Santino Fontana brought a strong baritone, and a gift for musical phrasing. His voice was well matched with Gravitte's for the duets sung by Tony and Donna, such as "A Song of Peace" and "A Guy Without a Girl."

Penelope hires Tony and Donna to perform on an ocean liner that will ferry all of NATO; she is under the misapprehension that they are Steve (Lawrence) and Eydie (Gorme). When the mistaken

identity is discovered, it is explained away by giving them a last name of "Stevenitti."

The duo gets more than they bargained for when the ship is commandeered by Russian spies Pavlov Pushkart (Will Swenson), Mimke Korsakov (Raymond Bokhour), and Grusha Vashnadze (Jackie Hoffman). They are led by the sinister, grim-faced Col. Vlad Residu (Michael McCormick).

The quartet's diatribe against "Western Ways" is a tour de force that subtly pastiches bits of songs from mid-20th century musicals such as *Gypsy* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. The spies' attitude softens by the end of the show, as being around Tony and Donna brings to the fore a secret wish to be performers.

Donna and Tony take a central role in resisting the invaders. Donna attempts to gain Residu's confidence in "Eye to Eye." (She discovers that one of his plans entails "composing" a new Russian national anthem whose melody steals that of "Satin Doll.") As Residu, McCormick was entertainingly lascivious in the number, during which saxophonist Chad Smith moved to the front of the stage for a solo.

A crucial way in which Donna helps is by boosting the morale of the other passengers. She ends the first act by leading the company in the rousing "We Are Gonna Save the World." The reticent, still-doubtful Penelope is forced to sing along. Tony, too, initially is skeptical, but joins Donna with a reprise of "A Song of Peace."

The orchestra assists in resisting the spies, too; they play Latin music after discovering that Grusha is fond of it. Hoffman stopped the show with "The Border Song;" she has a nimble voice that recalls musical comedy performers such as Ethel Merman and Dorothy Loudon. The number is another example of Cohen's ability to make the most of a performer's vocal range.

Tenor Bradley Dean, as a character named Big Apple, delivered an impassioned rendition of the star-struck "Born To Be In the Biz." Will Swenson infused Pavlov's "I've Got My Eyes on You" with charisma and a vocal style that echoed Sinatra.

In terms of the distribution of songs to characters, the balance is a bit uneven. Donna and Tony dominate the first act, but in the middle of the second act there are three numbers in a row in which we do not hear from either of them.

However, Donna subsequently is given the affable "Who Is This Guy?" The song is notable for the meticulousness with which the music is blended with the lyrics, to imitate natural speech inflections.

Laura Osnes infused Penelope with a British accent and haughty demeanor that recalled Julie Andrews in *Mary Poppins*. Osnes has

a delicate, sparkling soprano, and her voice was particularly lovely in Penelope's graceful ballad "Thank You for Today." ("Pleasant," Residu deadpans, when Penelope finishes her number.)

Some character developments and motivations seem a bit rushed; Penelope's somewhat abrupt abandonment of cynicism for thankfulness is an example, despite the beauty of her song. Nevertheless, Beane is a librettist with a keen sense of comic timing, and he can fill a script with a barrage of jokes that are organic to a situation.

Beane provided the smooth direction for the well-paced concert, which nominally was a staged reading (without scenery). However, there were unexpected bits of choreography, a highlight of which entailed Bokhour performing an impromptu tap dance.

The Big Time was presented at the New York Theatre Festival in 2005. As an affectionate parody of musical theater traditions, the show is stylistically similar to other shows that were running at that time (such as *Spamalot* and *The Musical of Musicals: the Musical!*), though *The Big Time* offers a thoughtful exploration of the human need for humor, as well as a bracing theme of resolute optimism overcoming dire circumstances.

Lassen put his entire body into his conducting, energetically moving in place. It was a blueprint for all of the performances, given by cast members who clearly were enjoying themselves. *The Big Time* is built on pastiche and stereotypes, but it is a refreshing, good-natured entertainment that is full of surprises.

The Princeton Symphony Orchestra will present The Art of the Movie Score at McCarter on May 9. For further information call (609) 258-2787 or visit www.mccarter.org/princetonpops.

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