

Pool Boy Makes A Splash at Barrington Stage.

Review by Rex Hearn.

The Musical Theater Lab at Barrington Stage may have a hit on their hands. Under the supervision of the distinguished composer and lyricist, William Finn, whose last successful Broadway musical 'Putnam County Spelling Bee' had its premiere when the company was in Sheffield, must now decide where to take the plunge! My immediate reaction is that this musical about a young singer / songwriter trying to make the big time supporting himself as a Pool Boy in L.A.'s fashionable Bel-Air Hotel, might best be received on the West Coast. For now, Pittsfield boasts another World Premiere.

All the characters in Pool Boy are well drawn, except the Pool boy's love interest, April. At the end of Act II April is seduced into going off to the Galapagos islands with an Arabian Prince. In her song, 'Swimming to China', she imagines the good things that will happen to her with nary a thought for the boy with whom she broke off. At this moment in the show one ought to feel that she has mixed feelings about leaving the boy for the prince.

Jay Armstrong Johnson as Nick, the Pool Boy, is marvelous. The show revolves around him and deservedly so because he works hard, acts so well and sings like a dream. His youthful good looks and athletic physique attract the women, poolside, but he holds his own with the men, especially in the knockout number, 'Playing Tennis', with the recording mogul, Rodney Duval, beautifully played by John Hickok. It's a great number that reaches into your gut and makes one realize the value of competition as a motivator. Testosterone flows in this exciting scene between the two men. It's well directed and well sung.

Other memorable numbers were 'Potential'; 'Background'; 'I've Never Felt This Before', a lovely duet between Nick and April. The song 'Little Piece of Sunlight' in which Nick espouses Andy Warhol's dictum that we all need our 15 minutes of fame might have been better ending the show. I felt the suddenness of Nick's last song 'Poolside at the Bel-Air Hotel' was too jarring as a soliloquy. Had he appeared in the same street clothes at the beginning, applying for the job, this would have had the effect of bookending the musical. Also, in this last song he sings the words: 'I've got an evening full of songs I can share, And if you don't enjoy them, I don't really care'. Having sat through 20 songs, most good, some sophomoric, I care that he doesn't care! This lyric needs reworking before the cynics pick up on it. He'd better care!

Cortney Wolfson as April was a delight. She made a fine debut. Jon Norman Schneider as Jack, Nick's friend, was perfection. At times I thought he needed his own song. But he harmonized beautifully with everyone when he was on stage. Cliff Bemis, manager of the hotel was terrific, his last brief song, which was good, was not listed. Sara Gettelfinger as Mrs. Rodney Duval the sexy middle aged lady after Nick, has enormous sex appeal. Sorab Wadia as the Sultan tended to overact; Arab Princes are far subtler with quiet authority. Oil wealth and private school educations at Hotchkiss and Eton give them 'breeding'. Wadia's characterization bordered on vulgar.

Nikos Tsakalacos composed the music, and some of the songs are very good as I have said. I think he ought to site his drum behind the pianist, because it is too loud. In fact the band trio needs toning down a lot. Could it be the small theatre ? Janet Allard's Book and Lyrics need little reworking, as I've suggested. One leaves the show thinking how cute it all is and how very appealing.

Daniella Topol has done well directing this new show , making it racy , interesting and never dull. Shonn Wiley did an excellent job choreographing the show, the ensemble scenes are well thought through. The tennis scene brilliant and original. Brian Prather's clever shifting scenery works like a charm. Holly Cain's costumes are delicious on the women. And the men's aren't too shabby either ! Nicole Pearce did a grand job with the lighting design . And Brad Berridge must have wondered why he was miking these people in such a small space ? Local support during the previews has been strong . Two shows have been added : July 29 and August 5 , both at 3pm. The run ends on August 8.

Warning : Toplessness on occasion ! This is not Julie Andrews in 'The Boy Friend'!

E N D.

Sent to Tony Prisendord, Publisher, Berkshire Record on 7/22/10, for publication on sale date 7/29/10. 4407 characters, 762 words by Rex Hearn