



'BIG FISH' A LAVISH FEAST: The cast of the new musical. Photo: Paul Kolnik



Theater Review

Big Fish musical a splashy, fun spectacle

BIG FISH

Book by John August

Music & lyrics by Andrew Lippa

Based on a novel by Daniel Wallace

Directed & choreographed by Susan Stroman

Neil Simon Theatre

250 West 52nd Street

(877-250-2929), www.BigFishTheMusical.com

By David NouNou

Whether one speaks of *Big Fish* the novel, or the 2004 Tim Burton movie, and now the musical, it has been and is epic in scope and vision yet intimate by nature. When you have a musical about a spinner of tall tales, a huge tableau consisting of a mermaid, a giant, a circus, a witch, love at first sight and most affecting a relationship between a father and son, you need a director/choreographer who can visualize and conceptualize these phantasmagorical stories into a cohesive musical, and who better to get for such an undertaking than Susan Stroman? She can overwhelm our senses and yet squeeze a tear out of us and somehow never runs out of ideas or tricks to amuse and amaze us.

In critiquing *Big Fish*, it would be unfair to compare it to its predecessors, the novel or the movie, which was also written by John August. A novel can take pages rhapsodizing the daffodil sequence; and in the movie, the special effects for that same scene takes our breath away. Unfortunately, when it comes to musical theater, this exact scene has parameters and confines in which to work. It has to work on a stage within a budget and numerous constraints. That becomes a drawback when you tackle an epic that is set in the present, the past, and flashbacks. Mr. August does admirably in distilling the storyline of the past and the flashbacks; it's the present that becomes mawkish and awkward. Also, the score by Andrew Lippa doesn't help the book or propel the story forward; it is rather bland and just retells or describes the scene we have just seen. The music and lyrics have no peaks to climb or cheer for; just valleys to tread through.

It isn't just the special effects and the tall tales that Edward Bloom (Norbert Leo Butz) tells; it is also the gap between a son trying to understand his father and who he is. It is through these tales that build up the intimate and personal moments when Will Bloom, the son, (Bobby Steggert) finally gets to know and appreciate his father.

Edward Bloom lives in the past and the present, and is usually played by two actors as the young Edward from the past and the old Edward in the present. However, both Edwards here are played by the brilliant Norbert Leo Butz. In the last 10 years since he originated the role of Fiyero in *Wicked*, Mr. Butz has become a premier force in the theater, especially musical theater. He brings Edward to life and brings him full circle. In the theater, he is a life force; he can make you laugh in one instant and cry the next.

Another performance to be savored is Kate Baldwin as Sandra Bloom, wife and mother. Her commitment to loving and believing in Edward is a fulcrum to the show and she does it impeccably with a beautiful voice to boot. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Bobby Steggert as the son, Will. He lacks the hardness and callousness that refuses to see the brilliance in his father. He lacks the tension that is needed for the conflict between father and son. He is also saddled with an inexplicable Western scene and song, "Showdown," in the middle of Act II where (in a dream sequence) he brings his dying father to court in a saloon. This is one of the few gaffes by Ms. Stroman that works more as filler than advancing the story. Bad choice here by Ms. Stroman, Mr. August and Mr. Lipka.

Honorable mention must be made of delightful supporting performances by Brad Oscar as the circus owner, Ryan Andes as Karl, the giant, and Krystal Joy Brown as Will's wife Josephine. Despite a couple of missteps, there is so much to be enjoyed in *Big Fish*, especially Norbert Leo Butz/Edward Bloom. Who wouldn't want to have a magical father like him?

Edited by Scott Harrah

Published October 18, 2013

Reviewed at performance on October 17, 2013

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