



'THE LITTLE TRAMP' ON BROADWAY: Rob McClure (center) & company of disappointing *Chaplin*.
Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

Chaplin, The Musical

Factual errors, inept book & direction doom tale of Hollywood icon

CHAPLIN, THE MUSICAL

Book by Christopher Curtis & Thomas Meehan

Music & lyrics by Christopher Curtis

Directed & choreographed by Warren Carlyle

Ethel Barrymore Theatre

243 West 47th Street

(212-239-6200), www.ChaplinBroadway.com

By David NouNou

The most astonishing thing about *Chaplin, The Musical* is the effrontery of its creators of taking one of the greatest artists, geniuses and legendary personalities of the 20th century and turning his life story into one of the drabest and dreariest musicals in years. Forget the fact that so many liberties were taken with people and events inaccurately portrayed. Didn't anyone think of checking on Wikipedia (or any online reference resource) to get the facts and dates straight? This brings us to the important questions of who, what, why, when, and where. Who are the people who came up with this cliché-ridden musical, and who did they think they were fooling? What were they thinking by taking such gross liberties? Why did they bother, if they were not going to get it right? When did they feel they even had a good musical to put on? Finally, where did they find investors to put money into this mess?

In 1974, Jerry Herman and Gower Champion conceived the musical *Mack and Mabel*, set in the

same timeframe as *Chaplin*. However, that show had a delicious score by Mr. Herman, colorfully conceived, handsomely mounted and directed by Mr. Champion. Its major flaw was the book had so much crammed into it, and the subject matter had long passed its prime. It showcased the love affair between silent screen director Mack Sennett and his lovely muse, the drug-plagued comedienne Mabel Normand. It starred a brilliant Robert Preston and an incandescent Bernadette Peters. Despite all that *Mack and Mabel* had going for it, and a huge advance sale, it lasted only 66 performances. I wonder how long...no, I cannot finish the sentence.

I did say that *Mack and Mabel* had a delicious and memorable score, which Chaplin lacks. That show was colorful and moved, whereas *Chaplin* is done in monochromatic black and white, as in a silent movie, and is static. It is obviously about Charlie Chaplin, his life and his creation of the unforgettable “little tramp”. However, it is too mired with historical inaccuracies in order to fit the mold of a musical, and the narrative is unfocused and wallowing all over the place. Director Warren Carlyle did not clear this confusion on stage and brought no real vision and style to it. Doing a piece in black and white is not original; it has just been drained of any life or color that may have added some dimension, but instead it just comes across as anemic.

Charlie Chaplin was an extraordinary artist and was full of contradictions in real life. Way too big a personality to confine to a template of a misguided musical. Unfortunately, for Rob McClure, he is not charismatic or spellbinding enough to capture the essence that was the unique Chaplin. Yes, he dresses like him, dons a moustache, and twirls a cane, but is that enough? He lacks the spirit and soul that was Chaplin.

As a non-musical but a monologue with clips, *Chaplin* could have been a great evening in the theater by casting a formidable actor of stature recounting his life story accurately, retelling it with genuine humor and not forced shtick. We could have sat back and basked and remembered this incredible man known as Chaplin and the rich legacy he left behind.

For all you posers and investors out there who are already eyeing and coveting the award for the “worst show of the year,” you are going to have to try extremely hard, for *Chaplin, The Musical* has set the bar to a new low so early in the theatrical season.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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