



'DEATH' BECOMES HER IN ITALY: (left to right) Jill Paice & Julian Ovenden in *Death Takes a Holiday*.  
Photo: Joan Marcus



*Theater Review*

# *Death Takes a Holiday:* Charming musical full of talent, despite flaws

**DEATH TAKES A HOLIDAY**

Book by Peter Stone & Thomas Meehan

Music & lyrics by Maury Yeston

Based on the dramatic play by Alberto Casella

Directed by Doug Hughes

Through September 4, 2011

Laura Pels Theatre in the Harold and Miriam

Steinberg Center for Theatre

111 West 46th Street, (212-719-1300)

[www.roundabouttheatre.org](http://www.roundabouttheatre.org)

By Scott Harrah

There is much to enjoy in this Off-Broadway musical adaptation of the classic 1934 film starring Frederic March, which was based on an Italian play by Alberto Casella. It is not often that one uses the word “charming” to describe a stage musical, but this noble attempt to tell the story of wealthy people at a posh lakeside villa in Northern Italy in 1921 right after World War I, through song, is old-fashioned in every sense. Unfortunately, its innocence and enchantment are both ultimately problematic as everything here reeks of theatrical mothballs, despite the efforts of the gifted cast.

Many audience members may never have seen the 1934 film, but it was a mere 79 minutes long. Some might know the story from the 1998 film *Meet Joe Black*, with Brad Pitt and Anthony Hopkins, a modern, updated retelling of *Death Takes a Holiday*. As a stage musical, there simply is not enough necessary plot material here to warrant a two-act show. There are some fine songs here, with music and lyrics by Maury Yeston, best known for penning lyrics and composing music for *Nine* in 1982, and the stage musical *Titanic* in 1997, both of which won Tony Awards for best musical and best score. However, those two shows were grand-scale epics, while *Death Takes a Holiday* is a far simpler tale, and reminds one of something F. Scott Fitzgerald might have written about Jazz Age European aristocrats and expatriate Americans indulging in the bon vivant glory of post-war life in the Roaring 1920s.

In the beginning, “death” comes to the villa and strikes a deal with the owner of the estate, Duke Vittorio Lamberti (Michael Siberry). This enigmatic visitor will not claim the life of anybody if he can spend the weekend at the villa with the family. Being “Death” (Julian Ovenden), he knows that Nikolai Sirki, a Russian prince who sustained huge gambling losses at a Monte Carlo casino, will commit suicide. Thus, “Death” takes over the identity of the Russian royal and is introduced to the Lamberti family.

As the weekend progresses, the prince/“Death” experiences all the mortal feelings they encounter on a daily basis, and ends up falling in love with Grazia (Jill Paice), the duke’s daughter. Although many of the songs are gorgeously mellifluous and almost operatic, particularly the soaring ballads sung by Grazia and Prince Nikolai such as “Alone Here with You,” other production numbers seem far too lugubrious and funereal for a musical set in upper-class Europe during the Jazz Age. Although this might seem like an unwarranted criticism, any aficionado of jazz and the novels of Fitzgerald, particularly *Tender is the Night* (which chronicled the upper crust of 1920s Europe), knows that the time period was an age of celebration, prosperity, and the hedonism of the rich. Europeans mix with well-to-do Americans in the show.

Julian Ovenden is a true standout as both an actor and singer. He exudes the requisite magnetism and alluring stage presence needed to make Ms. Paice's Grazia fall under the spell of the otherworldly "prince." It is also sheer delight to hear Mr. Ovenden’s dulcet tones on songs such as “I Thought That I Could Live.”

Performers with noteworthy voices include Rebecca Luker as Duchess Stephanie Lamberti, who is absolutely heartbreaking when she sings the touching ballad “Losing Roberto,” about her son who was killed in the war. Matt Cavenagh, as Major Eric Fenton, shows off his impressive vocal talents on the solo number, “Roberto’s Eyes.” In addition, Ms. Luker and Mr. Cavenagh are both personable and convincing in their roles.

The musical would be far more entertaining—and thematically tighter—if it were trimmed down to a compact one act. Most of the action in the second act is filler, the songs are repetitious, go nowhere, and do nothing to propel the plot. Considering that prolific, Tony-winning director Doug Hughes (*Doubt*) is usually such a perfectionist, it is surprising that he did not have the vision to see how much more effective *Death Takes a Holiday* would have been as a one-act, 95-minute musical, instead of relying on songs and plot details that simply pad the second act and bog down the flow of the narrative.

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