



QUIET, PLEASE, THERE'S A LADY ON STAGE: Tracie Bennett belts out a Garland classic in *End of the Rainbow*. Photo: Carol Rosegg



*Theater Review*

# *End of the Rainbow*: Musical bio-drama chronicles Judy Garland's troubles & talent

**END OF THE RAINBOW**

By Peter Quilter

Directed by Terry Johnson

Belasco Theatre

111 West 44th Street

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By Scott Harrah

*End of the Rainbow*, the musical bio-drama about Judy Garland's final months in London before her untimely death, is much like the legendary lady herself in her last days: a glamorous train wreck. The show, which recently transferred from the West End to Broadway, has one glaring flaw: Peter Quilter's scalding film soundtrack.

Broadway, has one glaring flaw: Peter Quilter's sordid, flimsy book.

At times, this seems more like a stage adaptation of a trashy British celebrity biography about Miss Garland than a solid theatrical tale about an American icon spinning out of control.

However, U.K. actress Tracie Bennett, as Miss Garland, gives a riveting performance loaded with exhausting energy, and she often transcends the middling material she's been handed and makes it work by keeping her interpretation of Judy from being more than a grotesque caricature. This is no easy task because the play paints the aging singer/actress as an unsympathetic monster fueled by her addiction to booze, pills, and the attention her erratic behavior creates. One leaves the theater emotionally drained, exhilarated, and overwhelmed by Miss Bennett's ambitious efforts, but also feeling empty.

Judy Garland was one of the most self-indulgent American entertainers of the 20th century, but she was also an extraordinary talent, and there was certainly more to her than alcohol, drugs, and being a demanding diva.

The story here centers on the 47-year-old Judy staying at the Ritz Hotel in London in December 1968 with her much-younger fiancé/manager Mickey Deans (Tom Pelphrey) and the kind, gay Scottish pianist Anthony (the magnificent Michael Cumpsty). As Judy prepares for a five-week gig at the Talk of the Town club, Mickey and Anthony try their best to keep the singer away from the alcohol, amphetamines and barbiturates that have ruined her voice and her life.

Most of the saga, loaded with preposterous, supposedly humorous dialogue, is a half-baked narrative that comes across as the type of sensationalism about stars one reads in the infamous U.K. tabloids. Judy begs for booze and drugs and throws tantrums like a spoiled child, feigns suicide by hanging out of a window to create a media sensation, and keeps dodging the hotel manager because she's a notorious deadbeat who doesn't want to pay the bill. It is difficult to feel much sympathy for Tom Pelphrey's Mickey, a man who seems more like a parasite and an enabler than a person who truly cares about Judy.

Michael Cumpsty, however, is the show's other standout. His multifaceted take on pianist Anthony, a big-hearted man who really wanted to help Judy pull herself out of the gutter, gives *End of the Rainbow* enough depth and soul to make the play plausible.

Director Terry Johnson keeps all the scurrilous action moving at a dizzying pace, and it is easy

to see why *End of the Rainbow* was a hit in London. The Brits love juicy potboilers about American stars behaving badly, but this show might be a hard sell here in the USA.

Why? On this side of the Atlantic, Judy represents vintage Americana and cannot be portrayed as simply a mess that drank too much, popped pills and swore like a sailor. She was also “Our Dorothy,” the little girl from *The Wizard of Oz* who went on to star in such great Hollywood classics as *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *Easter Parade*, and *A Star is Born*. She had a TV variety show; she sold out Carnegie Hall and the Palace Theatre. She is a sad, sacred figure like Elvis and Marilyn Monroe (American icons that also died too young, were extremely flawed and troubled, but are now revered for their talent and contributions to pop culture).

Tracie Bennett is often incandescent when she belts out such Judy classics as “The Trolley Song” and “Come Rain or Come Shine.” She’s not nearly frail or haggard-looking enough to actually resemble Judy Garland, but she has all the flailing hand movements and manic vocal delivery down beautifully. In addition, Miss Bennett gives the songs enough emotion and conviction so that she never comes across as a mere impersonator.

*End of the Rainbow* is certainly entertaining, especially when Miss Bennett sings, and this might have been a better Broadway vehicle if it were more of a homage, and she simply sang Judy’s classics and interspersed them with anecdotes about the singer’s life, with Michael Cumpsty at the piano. Ultimately, it is the dynamic chemistry between Mr. Cumpsty and Ms. Bennett that gives this epic its true heart.

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