



KEEP ON TRUCKIN'! The cast of *Hands on a Hardbody*. Photo: Chad Batka



Theater Review

Texas dreams: *Hands on a Hardbody*

HANDS ON A HARDBODY

Book by Doug Wright

Lyrics by Amanda Green

Music by Trey Anastacio and Amanda Green

Based on a film by S.R. Bindler

Directed by Neil Pepe

Brooks Atkinson Theatre

256 West 47th Street

(212-239-6200), <http://www.handsonahardbody.com/>

By Scott Harrah

Reality TV is a staple of American pop culture, so the idea of a Broadway musical about Texans competing to win a Nissan truck is not totally misguided. Based on the titular 1997 documentary, this stage adaptation of *Hands on a Hardbody* is certainly ambitious. However, it is a chore sitting through nearly two and a half hours of cliché characters, hackneyed dialogue, and predictable plot twists, all served up with a down-home score of songs about everything from religion to war.

The structure here, with downtrodden folks literally putting their hands on a “hardbody” Nissan, in the sweltering heat of Longview, TX, is similar to the film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* or Kander and Ebb's 1997 musical *Steel Pier*. Instead of the marathon dancers in those projects, here we have an alleged microcosm of East Texas, with each person willing to trade his or her health and sanity for up to 91 hours, hoping to be the last man or woman standing to win the truck.

Each character has a story and song that depicts his or her personal plight. There is the older man, JD Drew (Keith Carradine), plagued with health problems, but determined to win the truck for his wife. A former contest winner, Benny (Hunter Foster), is obsessed with past glory. Chris (David Larsen), a Marine, has self-esteem issues. Heather (Kathleen Elizabeth Monteleone) is the quintessential pretty girl, while Mexican American Jesus (Jon Rua) endures questioning about his green card. UPS worker Kelli (Allison Case) dreams about the glamour of being shipped overseas.

Of course, this would not be a Texas tale without a religious fanatic, and Norma (played with sass by the

golden-voiced Keala Settle) is a Jesus freak like you've never seen before. The trouble is, we *have* seen all this before. The characters are so one dimensional and stereotypical, and their troubles so contrived, that we cannot relate to the songs of woe and yearning.

Broadway has always thrived on Americana, and one leaves this show knowing that book writer Doug Wright, lyricist Amanda Green and co-composer Trey Anastacio had many good intentions to create an original musical about down-on-their-luck people risking everything for a dream. However, Mr. Wright's script lacks depth, and not all of Ms. Green and Mr. Anastacio's songs work, so the talents of the cast are sometimes wasted.

Given the flimsy material he has been handed, Neil Pepe has little to direct. A show with such nontraditional subject matter would be difficult to market in any era, but one as bleak as this is truly a hard sell in 2013, as we are facing a bad global economy and too many people are out of work and grappling with financial problems. With some serious trimming of a lot of filler, *Hands on a Hardbody* might make a sturdier show somewhere off-Broadway.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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