



HARRY POTTER STAR IS ALL 'BUSINESS': Daniel Radcliffe (center) & cast of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Photo: Ari Mintz

Theater Review

Daniel Radcliffe 'succeeds' in *Business* while really trying in dated musical revival



HOW TO SUCCEED IN BUSINESS WITHOUT REALLY TRYING

Book by Abe Burrows, Jack Weinstock, & Willie Gilbert

Music and Lyrics by Frank Loesser

Directed & choreographed by Rob Ashford

Al Hirschfeld Theatre

302 West 45th Street

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

By David NouNou

Daniel Radcliffe is one of the finest and most daring actors of his generation. Aside from his *Harry Potter* movies, he is a very good stage actor who has command of the stage as witnessed in his excellent performance in the 2008 revival of *Equus*. He is now tackling the musical genre in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

Yes, he is charming and one might say adorable, and he can act, sing and dance with ease. Herein lies my dilemma, being a stickler for accuracy and age appropriateness, for he is only 21. Knowing he is a movie star is the *raison d'être* to see this production and for bringing a younger audience to the theater due to his *Harry Potter* fame, so kudos are due here. The role that he plays, J. Pierrepont Finch, or as he prefers to be called, Ponti, climbs up the corporate ladder in a matter of weeks, eventually chooses the girl of his dreams, and wants to fulfill her wishes to live in New Rochelle. All this, and he is only 21.

Robert Morse was Finch in the 1961 original version that made him a genuine bona-fide star with a Tony win. Matthew Broderick, already a star, inhabited the part in the 1995 revival and also won a Tony; they both possessed impish, mischievous faces and innocence aptly suited for the cutthroat corporate world. However, they were both over 21. What can we expect next? Miley Cyrus as Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* because she is famous and from the South?

Innovative for its day, but very heavy-handed today, the book by Abe Burrows, who also directed it and with the help of a brand-new choreographer who styled snappy dances (none other than a young Bob Fosse), *How to Succeed* was the hot ticket of the 1961/62 season and ended up winning seven Tony Awards, including Best Musical. The clever touches that were in the original are all missing now due to Rob Ashford's lackluster direction and choreography.

I was a huge fan of Mr. Ashford's when he was just a choreographer, and his *Cry-Baby* and *Curtains* are still emblazoned in my mind. Since becoming both director and choreographer, starting with last year's *Promises, Promises*, his direction has become stilted in these revivals; and, in turn, Mr. Ashford has lost sight of his brilliant choreography. He does not have a clear and fresh vision of what 1960s musicals were all about.

Set at the World Wide Wickets Corporation, J. Pierrepont Finch enters reading a book entitled *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* and following its instructions in finding a large company to work in which one would be inconspicuous. Since he is our hero, we know he is going to go all the way to the top. Of course, there are some missteps up the corporate ladder, but he will conquer victorious and end up with the wife that wants to live in New Rochelle.

Mr. Radcliffe does it all: his singing is pleasant, his dancing has grace, and his acting is basic but controlled. Of all the people on that stage, he is the only one that has learned what it was like to be in the early 1960s. He embraces the period with no sense of kitsch or exaggeration. The audience is enthralled with him, I suppose due to his *Harry Potter* fame. The adulation is non-stop, and if he can bring in a new audience to fill the seats, I take my hat off to him. Another blessing to this production is John Larroquette as J.B. Biggley, the head of World Wide Wickets (50 years after the inception of the show, to this date no one knew what the company did). That was the kind of humor in 1961. Along with Mr. Radcliffe, Mr. Larroquette brings joy to the stage. He does not take his part seriously; he is just having fun up there, and we are enjoying it that much more.

Of all the supporting cast, there are only two people who understood their parts and that they were in a period piece and acted accordingly. Ellen Harvey as Miss Jones, (Mr. Biggley's secretary), must have heard the original cast recording and nails her part. Rob Bartlett plays the dual roles of Mr. Twimble and Wally Womper, the mailroom clerk and chairman of the board of the WWW, respectively, with the zest and flavor appropriate to the times. The rest of the cast were somewhere in the 2000s, pretending to fit in circa 1961.

We can still be grateful for that great Frank Loesser score with songs that include "I Believe In You," the rousing "The Brotherhood of Man," "A Secretary Is Not A Toy," and another showstopper with Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Larroquette, "Grand Old Ivy." The shame of it is that they are great songs that needed better staging and fresh period dances and not what felt as rehashed steps from Mr. Ashford's *Promises, Promises* set in the 1960s, but at the latter end of the decade. Although my gripe is that Mr. Radcliffe is way too young for the part, the audience gave him one of the loudest and longest ovations at curtain

call. As long as the audience is pleased and he is filling the theater on a nightly basis, I will go along on this merry ride.

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Editor's Note: www.StageZine.com, celebrating our 1-Year Anniversary on the Internet. We want to express our gratitude to all the theater PR professionals, industry organizations, and, most of all, our readers, followers and fans for their continued support and kind words throughout the past year, helping make www.StageZine.com a success.

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NouNou On Broadway

Broadway Capsule Reviews by David NouNou

MUSICAL REVIVALS



WHIZ KID: (left to right) Daniel Radcliffe & John Larroquette in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Photo: Ari Mintz



HOW TO SUCCEED IN BUSINESS WITHOUT REALLY TRYING

My admiration and respect go out to Daniel Radcliffe for having the guts to tackle the role of J. Pierrepont Finch in the musical *How to Succeed In Business Without Really Trying* at the age of only 21. Known around the world for starring in the *Harry Potter* movies, Mr. Radcliffe is introducing this dated show (though a landmark classic for its day) to a whole new generation of young theatergoers, many of whom would have otherwise missed seeing a great Frank Loesser musical.

The show is extremely book heavy, which by today's standards is rather leaden. What further hampers this musical is the lackluster direction and choreography by Rob Ashford. There is no freshness to the proceedings, which makes the evening even more labored. Even though he is extremely young for the part, thanks to Mr. Radcliffe's charm and charisma, the stage comes to life. The audience embraces him not much for his expertise, but because of his fame and willingness to try something new. The production is also blessed with the presence of John Larroquette as J.B. Biggley, who breezes through his part and has fun with it, which, in turn, entertains us. Finally, there is that wonderful score by Frank Loesser, who also wrote *Guys and Dolls*. Although a couple of songs are throwaway numbers today, his score set against the corporate world of climbing the ladder of success is still lustrous and a joy for audiences to savor.

AL HIRSCHFELD THEATRE, 302 West 45th Street, (212-239-6200).

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