



SISTER NICOTINE: Farah Alvin looks longingly at one of the last cigarettes in the USA. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

The Last Smoker in America:

Tepid satire never quite 'lights up'

THE LAST SMOKER IN AMERICA

Book & lyrics by Bill Russell

Music by Peter Melnick

Choreography by AC Ciulla

Music supervision by Fred Lassen

Directed by Andy Sandberg

Westside Theatre

497 West 43rd Street

(800-432-7780), www.LastSmoker.com

By Scott Harrah

The Last Smoker in America, despite having many clever moments, is hardly a definitive or effective musical satire of the current anti-smoking hysteria, and that is a shame because it could not be timelier or more topical.

If self-righteous, holier-than-thou politicians like New York City Mayor Bloomberg have their way, one day in the near future cigarette smoking and large, sugary sodas may be totally illegal. It is a disturbing fact indeed that, in an era when anything politicians consider unhealthy immediately gets slapped with absurd "sin" taxes and restrictions, more and more rights of Americans (and New Yorkers in particular) are being taken away in the name of "health" and higher taxes.

Therefore, here is what *should* be a relevant, irreverent musical comedy that lampoons American's anti-smoking hysteria and the quest to ban and tax anything politicians do not agree with or think is going to ruin public health. Alas, it fails on so many levels.

The Last Smoker in America could have been a scathingly funny look at the anti-tobacco movement, but

the narrative is so scattershot, it is often difficult to decide just what is being ridiculed here. Smoking? Suburbia? Religion? It is never made clear.

Book and lyric writer Bill Russell has some provocative ideas about how, sometime in the very near future, smoking may be banned entirely in the United States. Without spoiling too much of the story, the plot centers around a middle-class family in the future, when cigarettes are outlawed and smokers are sent to "smokers' prison" for lighting up.

The storyline is pedestrian but typical: Pam (Farah Alvin) is an English professor trying desperately to kick the nicotine habit, and failing miserably.

Her middle-aged husband Ernie (John Bolton) has dreams of becoming a rock star, often practicing his electric guitar in their suburban home while teenage son Jimmy (Jake Boyd) is addicted to video games and tries to act and sound like an African-American rapper, much to the frustration of his parents.

Neighbor Phyllis (Natalie Venetia Belcon) is a Jesus-obsessed, anti-smoking activist on a witch-hunt-style crusade to catch smokers lighting up. Ms. Belcon has an impressive singing voice, a winning stage presence and sharp comic timing, but her gifts are wasted on such thin material.

There are a few whimsical but disturbing touches that give the show a futuristic glimpse of what could happen if the anti-smoking zealots soon turn American into a tobacco-free nation: A talking electronic device in the family's home that sounds an alarm and begins a robotic lecture on the dangers of nicotine whenever cigarette smoke is smelled.

Unfortunately, lyric writer Bill Russell and musical composer Peter Melnick overload the show with far too many songs that do little to propel the plot forward and are simply unfunny. While production numbers featuring the father and son dressed as Osmond brothers and Phyllis clad in a showgirl leprechaun costume (doing an Irish jig that's a trenchant parody of *Riverdance*) are often distantly funny, yet totally pointless.

The most disappointing aspect of *The Last Smoker in America* is that the subject matter is tailor-made for parody. With better direction and songs that would actually send up the inanities of the anti-smoking movement, this show could have been a biting, hilarious statement about the paranoia of the "no smoking" crowd. Ultimately, *The Last Smoker in America* fails to ignite with any intelligent humor.

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