



**LESS GLITZY LA CAGE:** Kelsey Grammer (left) and Douglas Hodge play Georges & Albin in revival of *La Cage Aux Folles*. Photo: Joan Marcus

## *Theater Review*

# Stripped down to its bare musical essentials, excellent revival of *La Cage Aux Folles* remains relevant & entertaining

*La Cage Aux Folles*

Book by Harvey Fierstein

Music and lyrics by Jerry Herman

Directed by Terry Johnson

Longacre Theatre

220 West 48th Street

(212-239-6200), [www.LaCage.com](http://www.LaCage.com)

By David NouNou

This scaled-down version of *La Cage Aux Folles* is a rarity indeed: a musical revival that not only works, but is still relevant in modern-day America. The original version that opened in 1983 was a grand-scale musical, with all the trimmings of a wonderful Jerry Herman opus, replete with a huge cast, elaborate sets, and magnificent costumes. A dazzler for the eyes and ears, it needed all the appeal and acceptability for a conservative Reagan-era nation. The 2004 version was mounted on a grand scale, but lacked the heart that this musical so desperately needs. This version captures the heart and soul of the musical without too much razzle-dazzle and glamour. It has just enough to capture the essence of the illusion.

The book by Harvey Fierstein, based on the Jean Poiret play (made into a brilliant French movie in 1979), has the sensibilities of an American musical. Although it's still set on the French Riviera, it is the first musical that dealt with gay issues and what constitutes a family. Looking at it now, it really was a groundbreaking show. We are still dealing with the same issues: gay marriage, raising a child, children growing up and wanting to get married. In the show, his parents are eccentric, while her's are uptight.

Gee, what new musical this season has "borrowed" a variation of this storyline and turned it into schlock, while *La Cage* still manages to resonate marvelously on its own?

The brilliance of this musical, in large part, has to be attributed to Jerry Herman. In the pantheon of musical theater, Jerry Herman is one the least appreciated songwriters. When others are lauded as legends, he is taken for granted as just a schmaltzy tunesmith. In truth, any man who has written the scores of *Milk and Honey*, *Hello Dolly*, *Mame*, and *La Cage Aux Folles*, just to name a few, is a genius in his own right. The score of *La Cage* is a joy to behold. In short it is memorable and stays with you a long time after you leave the theater. Mr. Herman may not possess the genius of extemporaneous rhyiming

couplets, but he sure can write a score that lingers decades later. It's impossible to get such classics as the anthem "I Am What I Am" and "The Best of Times" out of one's head after seeing this vintage masterpiece.

The cast is headed by Kelsey Grammer of "Frasier" and "Cheers" fame, as Georges, and Douglas Hodge, making his Broadway debut in his Olivier-winning role as Albin. Mr. Grammer and Mr. Hodge are perfect in their roles, but mismatched as a couple. Grammer has American roots and Hodge has broader British stage experience, and the two don't always mesh together. After all, they are supposed to be together for 20 years, which is mentioned here but not actually realized. This is no fault of either actor; this production has more of a British sensibility, for it is another transport from London's Menier Chocolate Factory. As directed by Terry Johnson, he has managed to adapt it for 21st century audiences beautifully, with a lot of distinct touches. However, he has not been able to find the right balance to entwine Georges and Albin. Regardless, this *La Cage* is so brilliant in its overall scope that it doesn't matter. When Mr. Hodge, as Albin, sings act one's closing showstopper "I Am What I Am," no one can argue that he doesn't pack a trenchant emotional wallop, even if his rendition of the song doesn't have the same effect as George Hearn's in the 1983 original. Nonetheless, Mr. Hodge's Albin is still tremendously moving in this crucial song, which has always been a demand for social tolerance, justice, self-respect, and standing up for one's true self.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the Cagelles. Whereas the Cagelles always consisted of 12 men, here there are six. Along with Mr. Hodge, they create the illusion of drag and all that it entails. Although the La Cage nightclub here is not as posh and swanky as the original, and may have seen better days, the Cagelles have not lost their luster. They, along with Mr. Grammer and Mr. Hodge, make us feel very welcome to their sequined, fantasy-filled milieu, and we are better off for it.

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WHAT A DELIGHTFUL DRAG: Douglas Hodge as Zaza in *La Cage Aux Folles*.

Photo: Joan Marcus



#### LA CAGE AUX FOLLES

This is one of the few scaled-down musical revivals that actually works. Why? It has a wonderful and memorable score by Jerry Herman. Like *Cabaret* and *Chicago* before it, this top-notch revival of the Tony-winning musical has been stripped of its glitz and razzle-dazzle but has maintained its basic essentials: A brilliant score, a good book, and two very good leading men as the gay couple with a straight son (A.J. Shively) who has come home to announce that he wants to get married to a girl (Elena Shaddow) with a strait-laced family. Kelsey Grammer (Georges) and Douglas Hodge (Albin) play the gay couple. Although they may seem mismatched, individually they are both perfect in their roles. Although the club may not be as swanky and grand as in its original inception, the chorus of Cagelles, reduced from 12 to six, have not lost their luster, nor their ability to create their illusions. As recreated by director Terry Johnson, he has managed to maintain the heart and spirit of the original version, while adding some new touches of his own. By the way, the ending with Georges and Albin is a joy to behold. *La Cage Aux Folles* is a classic American musical, with a lush score and a message that is still quite topical today.

LONGACRE THEATRE, 220 West 48th Street, (212-239-6200).

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