



'CLEAR DAY' REVIVAL IS A MURKY MESS: (left to right) David Turner, Jessie Mueller, and Harry Connick, Jr. in *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*. Photo: Nicole Rivelli



Theater Review

Not even the great Harry Connick, Jr. can save dismal, dreary, un-*Clear Day* revival

ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER

Music by Burton Lane

Original book & lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner

New book by Peter Parnell

Re-conceived & directed by Michael Mayer

Choreographed by Joann M. Hunter

St. James Theatre

246 West 44th Street, (212-239-6200)

www.OnAClearDayBroadway.com

By David NouNou

Here is a short history lesson from someone who actually saw the original *On A Clear Day* way back on November 20, 1965, at the once-glorious Mark Hellinger Theatre. I remember the exact date vividly because that was my 14th birthday, and for a present, I wanted my parents to take me to see this show. The original version had one of the biggest advances in Broadway history, with the highest ticket price ever of \$11.90 for an orchestra seat.

The year before, *Fiddler on the Roof* had the nerve to raise the price to a shocking \$9.90 from \$9.60. The reason for this large advance was two-fold: Alan Jay Lerner was returning to Broadway and Louis Jourdan, the then-known handsome French movie star of *Gigi* fame, was to be the lead and his co-star was the then-relatively unknown, soon-to-become the magnificent Barbara Harris. The show's out-of-town tryout was a total disaster and ran over four hours long. Revisions were made on a round-the-clock basis where the part of Mr. Jourdan was diminishing and the role of Ms. Harris was growing. Well, Jourdan left the show and the new leading man

was John Cullum. Needless to say, theatergoers who paid top dollar to see a movie star were disappointed to see relative unknowns. I was one of them. I remember the score was lovely, delightful and memorable, but the book was heavy-handed and cumbersome. However, I still remember the magnificent Ms. Harris. Her performance and the emergence of the glorious 18th century Melinda from the drab, uninteresting 20th century Daisy Gamble is a theatrical memory to cherish. You can see what I am talking about if you rent the 1970 movie version with Barbra Streisand, where she makes a stab to recreate the magic created by Ms Harris on the stage.

You might be asking yourself why am I writing a history lesson and not talking about this current version? The answer is simple, dear readers. I am trying to stall as long as possible to avoid writing about this ill-conceived, wretched, so-called revival of a musical. I am trying to hold on to the good parts of this show in my memory, instead of the travesty I just witnessed. What was cumbersome in 1965 is just a total mess in 2011. Not even the glorious Harry Connick, Jr. can pump any form of life into this listless, dreary, cheesy production, which has been updated and is now set in 1974.

Mr. Connick is always welcome on Broadway. He has proven how wonderful he can be, as evidenced by his turn in the splendid 2006 revival of *The Pajama Game*. He must have known (even if the new creators Michael Mayer and Peter Parnell did not) that the character of Dr. Mark Bruckner, the psychiatrist, who treats Daisy for her smoking addiction, or in this case David Gamble (David Turner), is not the focal character of *On A Clear Day*, but the character of Daisy Gamble *Was, Is, and Always Will Be* the focal character no matter what misguided twist you throw in the mix.

The whole crux of the show is while the doctor is delving into the inner psyche of yet another one of his ordinary patients, in this case Daisy, a whole new, extraordinary, gloriously sublime woman, British aristocrat Melinda Moncrief, emerges. Even though Melinda is a former self of Daisy from the 18th century, he craves for Melinda and tries to make Daisy disappear, thus forming Dr. Bruckner's dilemma. The whole beauty of the show is watching an expert actress transform Drab Daisy into Miraculous Melinda, and not to use a cheap gimmick of splitting the character of Daisy/Melinda into gay Dull David and 1940s chanteuse Middling Melinda (Jessie Mueller). The whole romantic conundrum is lost. How in heaven's name did no one (be it the producers or the creative team) see this fatal flaw? Did they really think that presenting Mr. Connick and throwing a gay twist was all that was needed to remedy this show? Mr. Connick is great to have, but the character of Daisy/Melinda is much more essential to the show. Without Daisy/Melinda, you have no show, there is no transformation or growth in the character, and so we are left with a hodgepodge mess.

I really felt Mr. Connick's pain, not because of his longing for Melinda, but for how uncomfortable he looked on the stage. He is in fine voice, but that is about it. His Dr. Bruckner is floundering, because with all the additional rewrites and padding of his part, he is still left with no tangible character to portray. Daisy may have been drab, but she had the ability to talk to flowers and make them grow before our very eyes. David Turner as David Gamble lacks the charm and is too whiny to even be drab, and certainly lacks any power to make anything grow. Jessie Mueller is a fine-sounding 1940s chanteuse. However, Ms. Mueller lacks the charisma to make Melinda beguiling and enchanting.

Only two supporting performers are really worthy of being mentioned. Kerry O'Malley made the part of Dr. Sharone Stein, Dr. Bruckner's fellow psychiatrist, plausible and sincere; and Drew Gehling was charming and affable as Warren, David's boyfriend. It is a pity that Mr. Gehling did not play David Gamble, as he would have imbued him with much needed charm and would seem to possess the ability to actually make flowers grow.

On the visual side, the sets consisted of kaleidoscopic/Rorschach test sliding panels, really uninspired in any shape, way or form. The costumes were dreary but that was the fault of 1970s fashion. The choreography by Joann M. Hunter was generic and looked like replicas of dances she did when she was a dancer.

However, the guiltiest parties in this travesty are Peter Parnell and Michael Mayer for re-conceiving and coming up with this deplorable version. Any professional in the theater would clearly know that you do not separate the genders of Daisy/Melinda because that would negate the growth and maturation of both women. It is essential that the audience see the materialization of Melinda emerging from Daisy. It is supposed to be a seamless birth as Melinda comes out of Daisy. In the current version when Melinda enters, she steps out from behind a screen and David slides into the sofa. No transition. Hence, missing the point. Didn't any of the powers-that-be see this or hear the moans and groans from the audience when Mr. Connick leans in to kiss David/Melinda towards the end of Act I as he sings the haunting song "Melinda"? That to me would have seemed like a big clue right there; that this is not working.

I am a huge fan of Mr. Connick and I look forward to his return to Broadway in something more suited to his talents. It is ironic that Hugh Jackman is just across the street, being his convivial self and raking in millions. My suggestion to Mr. Connick: just be as equally convivial as Mr. Jackman, for you have the talent, voice, charisma and savoir-faire to melt us all. You also have the clout to get rid of the play and the rest of the players, just bring out a piano, and play all the original songs from *On A Clear Day*, and I promise we would all come back and have a glorious

time just with you and the splendid Burton Lane and Alan J. Lerner score.

What a shame that this *On A Clear Day* was one of the last shows of 2011 and brings the year to a disastrous close. A double whammy for musicals: a couple of weeks ago, *Bonnie & Clyde* bored us to death, and now *On A Clear Day* drives us to madness because of the inept handling of the book. Thank God for *Lysistrata Jones* for coming at the last moment to give the musical season some redemption. I shudder to think how mean my review would have been had Mr. Connick not been in this show.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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