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HEEL ON WHEELS: Nick Adams as the fabulous Felicia atop the iconic trans-Australia bus 'Priscilla' in the joyous musical adaptation of Aussie camp classic *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, now playing at the Palace.

Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

The Americanization of *Priscilla*: Down Under musical is anything but a drag



Priscilla Queen of the Desert the Musical

Written by Stephan Elliott and Allan Scott

Music supervision & arrangements by Stephen 'Spud' Murphy

Directed by Simon Phillips

Choreography by Ross Coleman

Palace Theatre

1564 Broadway

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

By Scott Harrah

Broadway has a new queen that will certainly have a long reign over the musical-theater realm —and her name is Priscilla. Rarely do musical adaptations of films work on the stage, and the same notion holds true for “jukebox musicals,” the much-maligned theatrical genre that weaves classic pop songs into a narrative. In the past decade, only the ABBA-themed *Mamma Mia!* and *Jersey Boys* (featuring the songs of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons) have achieved phenomenal, long-running success as “jukebox” musicals. So it was truly risky when, back in 2006, Australia and New Zealand productions attempted to adapt the 1994 Aussie cult classic film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* into a full-fledged stage musical. The subsequent production on London’s West End was a commercial hit, but received a lukewarm response from the British critics.

How can one adapt a road movie about drag queens traveling through Australia’s

Outback on a rickety but bedazzled, adorned old bus, dressing up in outlandish costumes and lip-synching to other people's songs into a Broadway show? The concept itself does not sound like it would work on the stage, but the naysayers who doubted Priscilla could be turned into a Broadway musical were totally wrong. After all, drag queens are primarily known for mouthing the words to pop and disco standards for camp value, and that fact alone is the sheer, simplistic brilliance of this entertaining show, which—without question—the best musical adaptation of a film to hit Broadway since *Hairspray*.

Here is a show that is not only plausible, with cherished pop and disco songs everybody knows, but actually enhances the 1994 film by bringing it to glorious life on the stage for the masses to savor and enjoy. From the very first scene, when three divas, acting as a sort of disco Greek chorus, descend down to the stage on wires, belting out the Weather Girls' gay disco anthem "It's Raining Men" as buff chorus boys dance around. The show starts out with a glorious, ethereal bang and never lets up, and that's the true benchmark of any great musical. Nathan Lee Graham, as Miss Understanding, a Tina Turner impersonator, is hysterical when she sings "What's Love Got to Do With It?"

The same characters from the film are all here: Tick/Mitzi (Will Swenson from the recent revival of *Hair*); buff Adam/Felicia (Nick Adams); and the middle-aged trannie Bernadette (Tony Sheldon, giving the show's best performance), who is mourning the death of her boyfriend, but the story maintains a consistent lighthearted tone even in its dramatic moments. Even the funeral for Bernadette's lover is done with humor and verve as the cast sings Thelma Houston's disco crowd-pleaser "Don't Leave Me This Way."

Without giving too much of the story away, the boy/girls travel throughout the Outback from Sydney, New South Wales to the far-away town of Alice Springs in the middle of the Australian desert to perform at a casino and meet Tick's son, Benji (alternated at certain performances by Luke Mannikus and Ashton Worez). Only Mr. Sheldon, a native Australian actor, truly has an authentic Aussie accent, while the rest of the predominantly American cast struggles with the "Down Unda" twang, but it doesn't matter because the show is so entertaining that one overlooks the show's need for a better dialect coach.

What keeps everything moving at a toe-tapping, high-energy pace are the many familiar songs, from Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff" to "MacArthur Park" (featuring

cast members dressed in cupcake costumes) to Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" and Peaches and Herb's "Shake Your Groove Thing." Unfortunately, the ABBA songs that were so prevalent in the film are totally absent here, but it would not make sense to use them since *Mamma Mia!* is playing just down the street. Also missing is the hilarious saccharine ballad "I've Never Been to Me" by Charlene that was so iconic in the film.

In the Australian and London productions, the Felicia character was obsessed with Aussie pop superstar Kylie Minogue, and performed a medley of her songs atop Ayers Rock, but here Felicia's idol has been replaced by Madonna to appeal more to American audiences. Much as Miss Minogue is an Aussie legend, she is not as famous on this side of the Atlantic, and the show benefits from a full slate of Material Girl classics, from "Like a Prayer" to "Like a Virgin" and "Holiday."

However, it is puzzling as to why Felicia didn't sing a Madonna song atop Ayers Rock, the landmark also known as Uluru to aborigines. The show could have done without the "girls" singing Pat Benatar's silly 1980s power-pop ballad "We Belong" while standing on top of Uluru.

There were numerous reports that Bette Midler and some of the show's other producers wanted to tone down the overt sexuality of the film to make the musical more palatable for American audiences, but most of the film's outrageousness is left intact, and it hardly seems "sanitized" to appeal to families. Even the infamous ping-pong scene is kept in the show—but done tastefully—and carried out in a hilarious number by Filipina spitfire Cynthia (played with over-the-top aplomb by J. Elaine Marcos) as she dances atop an Outback bar to the old M kitsch song "Pop Muzik," much to the horror of her husband, Bob (C. David Johnson), the liberal-minded mechanic who helps repair the drag queens' bus and takes a shine to Bernadette.

The real stars of the show, besides the hit parade of a soundtrack, are Tim Chappel and Lizzie Gardiner's outlandish costumes, for which both won an Oscar in the film version of *Priscilla*. All the platform shoes, flip-flop sandal dresses, absurd, colorful wigs and clown-like makeup transform the cast into colorful caricatures that are always visually appealing.

Ross Coleman's choreography is serviceable but rather pedestrian, but the energy of the cast and the songs more than make up for the lack of innovation in the dance moves.

Simon Phillips' direction keeps everything moving at a rapid-fire pace, but the show isn't free of flaws. Most of the book contains the same jokes from the film, but some fall flat. In addition, Will Swenson's performance as Tick seems a bit too "butch" to be completely convincing.

More than anything, *Priscilla* has a universal message of tolerance and acceptance of misfits beneath its glitzy, fun-loving exterior, and it is something that people of all nations can relate to in the 21st century. However, the show is never heavy-handed. It is pure, feel-good entertainment, with plenty of confetti raining from the ceiling and songs that will inspire audiences to get up and dance and sing along, and isn't that the point of any great Broadway musical?

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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.

Broadway Listings

NouNou On Broadway

Broadway Capsule Reviews by David NouNou

ORIGINAL MUSICALS



G'DAY, BROADWAY: The cast of the Broadway musical adaptation of the Australian cult film, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Photo: Joan Marcus



PRISCILLA QUEEN OF THE DESERT THE MUSICAL

Hallelujah, it's raining (no, pouring) drag, sequins, confetti and fun at the Palace Theatre. It has been over three years that Broadway has had such a fun (original, not revival) musical that is entertaining just for its own sake and doesn't take itself so seriously. Based on the 1994 movie of the same name, this is one film adaptation that bravely works. The movie is so iconic now that one would find it hard to imagine it being a satisfying musical. Is it perfect? No. Does it have flaws? Yes. But, who cares? It delivers the goods, and in the most jaw dropping of ways.

By now everyone knows the story, about three drag queens that travel the Outback in, Australia to perform their act at a casino and for Tick/Mitzi (Will Swenson) to finally meet his son. Of no fault of Mr. Swenson, but in this version his role has been sanitized to be more of a leading man than the leader of a drag group. He has the chops for Tick the father but lacks the effrontery of Mitzi the drag queen. Tony Sheldon as Bernadette comes off best. Having played the role in Australia as well as in London, his Bernadette is perfect and perfection. Nick Adams (Felicia) has the toughest part. In the movie Guy Pearce was incredible as Felicia, the perfect blend of, bitchy, camp and abrasiveness. Mr. Adams here has the unenviable task of delivering tired recycled bitchy lines and at times comes off as over the top.

However as a trio they work very well together. The fourth lead, as in the movie, is the costumes. Not since the original versions of *Follies* and *La Cage Aux Folles* have there been such eye-popping, and, as I said earlier, jaw dropping, costumes as the ones designed here by Tim Chappel and Lizzy Gardiner. They even surpass what they created for the movie. They are showstoppers in and of themselves.

Disco music rules here, from Donna Summer, Gloria Gaynor, Madonna to John Denver (don't ask, just go with it). The songs are infectious and one cannot help but dance to the beat in one's seat. A fun musical is supposed to give you a good time and have you leaving the theater with a smile on your face and fond memories of the show. *Priscilla* delivers all this; and for the disco bunnies out there, even more.

PALACE THEATRE, 1564 Broadway at 47th Street, (212-239-6200).

www.priscillaonbroadway.com

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