



PROMISES, PROMISES: (left to right) Kristen Chenoweth, Dick Latessa, Sean Hayes in *Promises, Promises*. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Revival of 1960s musical *Promises, Promises* delivers, but chemistry of Hayes & Chenoweth strained

Promises, Promises
Book by Neil Simon
Music by Burt Bacharach
Lyrics by Hal David
Directed and choreographed by Rob Ashford
Broadway Theatre
1681 Broadway at 53rd Street
(212-239-6200), www.PromisesPromisesBroadway.com

By David NouNou

It was 1968 and both *Hair* and *Promises, Promises* opened that year. They were both mega-hits but for totally different reasons. It is now 2010, 42 years later, and both of them are back playing on Broadway again. One was bringing in the new wave, while the other was bringing innocence and frivolity to a close. *Hair* was literally ringing in the Age of Aquarius. After all, it was the hippie movement, the Vietnam War, flower power, and times were changing, and it also promised the titillation of nudity on stage. In fact, nudity became a movement of its own. A staple you might say for almost every comedy, drama, or musical. *Promises, Promises*, on the other hand, based on Billy Wilder's movie *The Apartment*, offered a quasi-funny book by the then-king of comedy writing, Neil Simon, and a rollicking, infectious score by the then-kings of pop music and the airwaves, Burt Bacharach and Hal David, making their Broadway debut. The question now is: which one still has relevance?

Although they both are anachronistic today, they survive due to their scores. *Hair* was the voice for its generation and *Promises, Promises* was the sound of the day. You couldn't turn on the radio without hearing Dionne Warwick or Dusty Springfield singing a Bacharach/David song. Like *Bye Bye Birdie*, produced earlier this season, both shows are both almost unrevivable. Both survive solely because of their infectious scores. *Promises, Promises* still has the bounce, verve, the joy, and humability needed for a successful Broadway musical. For those who are unfamiliar with the score, the two songs sung by Ms. Chenoweth, "A House Is Not A Home" and "I Say A Little Prayer," were not in the original version. They were two Bacharach/David singles sung by Dionne Warwick. They serve no purpose to the show other than familiarity, and as placed, are totally inappropriate in the context of the show. They only serve as padding for Ms. Chenoweth's part in act one.

The plot centers on Chuck "C.C". Baxter (Sean Hayes) working up the corporate ladder at a big insurance company. He's a bachelor with a humble apartment. The apartment ends up being used by Baxter's bosses for their extra-marital activities. Favors are exchanged. The bosses do their thing, while Baxter gets promoted. Along the way, Baxter falls head over heels for Fran Kubelik (Kristen Chenoweth), an employee at the same company, who just happens to be the latest conquest of J.D. Shelldrake (Tony Goldwyn), a married man and the company's HR executive. Wanting the affair to remain private, Shelldrake wants the apartment solely for his assignations with Fran, and thus the complications begin. The one time that Baxter ends up getting lucky is Christmas Eve; the night he discovers Shelldrake's mistress is none other than Fran. He goes to a bar to drown his sorrow, and to our pleasure, meets Marge MacDougall (the

incandescent Katie Finneran).

Mr. Hayes and Ms. Chenoweth are both very good indeed in their own right, but not believable for a minute that they could end up together romantically, and isn't that the fundamental reason for a romantic musical? You can see them as brother and sister but not as a couple.

Independently they both know their way around the musical stage. Mr. Hayes is lovable, has a good voice, and great comic timing, but also has a lot of Jack McFarland's mannerisms, from his unforgettable role on "Will and Grace". This role requires a strong schnook of a leading man (as originally portrayed by Jerry Orbach in his Tony Award-winning role). He's the guy who Fran will eventually come to see as the right man for her.

Ms. Chenoweth is cute, in great voice, and is very charming as Fran. She is way too strong and independent a personality and not vulnerable enough for Mr. Hayes's C.C. Baxter. Thus, the imbalance for a romantic musical and lack of chemistry to be romantically involved. Not to take anything away from Mr. Hayes, but had the role of C.C. Baxter been portrayed by someone like Matthew Morrison or Harry Connick, Jr., the romantic chemistry might have remained intact and the comedic aspects of the musical could have seemed less dated.

The show's other highlights are Katie Finneran's Marge, Baxter's hapless one-night encounter. Her one and a half scenes in act two are priceless. She proverbially steals the show. The orchestrations by Jonathan Tunick are also outstanding. He rightfully upholds the peppy zing and authentic sound that was specifically created for this show. Adding to the fun is Dick Latessa as Dr. Dreyfuss. He is Baxter's next-door neighbor, who resuscitates Fran after she attempts to overdose on sleeping pills.

As directed and choreographed by Rob Ashford, no new inroads are made. Very lackluster and unoriginal direction, and the dance routines are similar to his numbers in *Cry-Baby, the Musical*. Another unfortunate problem for this musical is the cavernous theater in which it is playing. The Broadway Theatre is humongous. Since the size of the musical has been scaled down and the sets are representational, other than Baxter's apartment, the stage seems bare. In a smaller house/stage, with the right casting for the leads, this could have been a relevant revival. Just as in *Hair*, the book may be dated, but the score is brilliant. The timeless music gives the two shows their immortality.

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**'PROMISES, PROMISES': Sean Hayes & Kristen Chenoweth in *Promises, Promises*.
Photo: Joan Marcus**



PROMISES, PROMISES

Musical revivals are a very tricky venture. A lot is needed to capture the essence and flavor of a once-popular show. In this case, stronger casting and more original direction and choreography were needed as key ingredients, especially when the show is anachronistic by today's standards. The main reason for this revival is the music by Burt Bacharach and lyrics by Hal David, brilliantly orchestrated by Jonathan Tunick. The score is alive, vibrant, and full of joy. Based on Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*, the plot centers around a lovable schnook (Sean Hayes) who has an apartment and lets his bosses use it for extra-marital relations in return for his advancement at work. Along the way, he falls head over heels for Fran Kubelik (Kristen Chenoweth), an employee in the same company, but is thwarted by the firm's HR executive, J.D. Sheldrake (Tony Goldwyn), a man having an actual affair with Fran. Mr. Hayes and Ms. Chenoweth are both very good individually, and they possess great singing voices, but as the leads in a romantic musical that eventually end up together, they are totally miscast. They are more suited for a brother and sister relationship than anything romantic or physical, and that is the major problem with this revival. In order to make this musical more believable, it needed two leads with more chemistry for a real love connection. The standout performance is Katie Finneran as Marge MacDougall, Baxter's hapless potential one-night stand. In her all-too-brief appearance, she manages to steal the show. However, the real standout of *Promises, Promises* has always been its music. Even in the original 1968 version, the major selling point was the brilliant score by Bacharach and David.

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