



SHOW DOESN'T HAVE A PRAYER: Carolee Carmello (center) & company in *Scandalous: The Life and Trials of Aimee Semple McPherson*. Photo: Jeremy Daniel

Zero (0) Stars

Theater Review

Scandalous: Saint or sinner?

Bio-musical about Aimee Semple McPherson is hell for audiences

SCANDALOUS

THE LIFE AND TRIALS OF AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON

Book & lyrics & additional music by Kathie Lee Gifford

Music by David Pomerantz & David Friedman

Directed by David Armstrong

Neil Simon Theatre

250 West 52nd Street

(877-250-2929), www.ScandalousOnBroadway

By Scott Harrah

Audiences have sat through a lot of dreadful productions in the first part of the 21st century, but this inane, misguided atrocity masquerading as a musical has to be the worst Broadway show of the New Millennium. It is too dull and snail-paced to even qualify as camp or a theatrical “train wreck,” and mind-boggling in its sheer ineptness, from the scattershot, so-called “book” to the laughable “lyrics,” to David Armstrong’s uncontrolled “direction” to Lorin Latarro’s mind-numbing, needless “choreography”.

One knows a show is truly a stinker when the audience barely applauds after each song/number, many walk out after the first act, and we overhear the bartender at intermission in the lobby. When, asked by patrons if the second act is better, she tells them to stay because it moves faster and will “be more scandalous.”

TV talk-show icon Kathie Lee Gifford has spent the past 12 years of her life working on this

musical bio-drama retelling of the life of 1920s and 1930s Pentecostal Christian lady evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, so it is shocking indeed that no one told her that the story simply does not lend itself to musical theater. The musical reportedly has been mounted and reworked in various productions, most recently under the title *Saving Aimee* in Seattle last year. Yet no amount of doctoring could “improve” a show that was already dead on arrival, no matter which city produced it.

Multiple Tony Award nominee Carolee Carmello is the show’s only saving grace. She has finally landed a leading role suitable to her immeasurable talents, and no one can deny that she has a haunting voice, but even she cannot convincingly act her way through this one, considering the shoddy material she’s given. We see Ms. Carmello’s Aimee go from a 17-year-old girl growing up on the Canadian prairie to marrying the charming Irish Holy Roller preacher man Robert Semple (Edward Watts), much to the disapproval of her pious Christian mama Minnie (Candy Buckley). However, her loving, understanding father James (George Hearn, a gifted stage veteran whose talents are wasted here) gives his blessing.

What is truly puzzling is the way Kathie Lee Gifford twists historical facts around to suit the leaden, ludicrous book. Watch in awe as Aimee and Brother James set sail for China to save souls, on a ship full of dancing Irish folks in the production number “That Sweet Lassie from Cork.” The song is so preposterous and unnecessary, but if it was good enough for James Cameron’s *Titanic*, it is good enough for Ms. Gifford to pad the already overlong first act.

The only “decent” number in Act One is “A Girl’s Gotta Do What a Girl’s Gotta Do,” taking place in a Kansas City brothel Aimee visits to try and convert the working girls, particularly the sassy African-American madam, Emma Jo Schaeffer (Roz Ryan). However, this particular song and the mock sexy choreography are both pointless and do nothing to propel the story.

Act Two starts out somewhat livelier than the first, as Aimee sets up her Angelus Temple in Los Angeles. She becomes infamous in Tinseltown for acting out Biblical plays in the sanctuary, and the song “Adam and Eve” features Aimee singing about the stars of the Garden of Eden, complete with a G-string clad Adam (Watts) and Eve (Billie Wildrick) in a nude body stocking, an animated serpent, and a bejeweled apple. In another Biblical song, Aimee sings, “Bring me the head of John the Baptist.” Within seconds, a platter appears with a cheesy severed head that looks like a tacky prop from a children’s haunted house.

In another scene, Aimee is visited by two Ku Klux Klan members who bring her a suitcase filled with gold ingots. They mutter racist statements, and Aimee decides to keep the gold to help build her church, and is never visited by the KKK again. What was the point of this? This

question is never answered. Aimee supposedly heard "voices" from God. One wonders what "voices" Ms. Gifford heard while writing the script.

Ms. Gifford should take 95 percent of the blame for this multimillion-dollar dud, but certainly director David Armstrong must also take a lashing for allowing her to get away with so many factual inaccuracies, from mentions of facelifts in the 1920s to bandying about the names of John Wayne and Anthony Quinn (he didn't start his film career until 1936) to play Moses in her retelling of the Passover story.

Most perplexing of all is why Ms. Gifford believes Aimee Semple McPherson is an historical figure worthy of heroine worship. Yes, Aimee was the first female evangelist and religious media sensation, but she was also a charlatan and a fraud. Ms. Gifford may think she herself is a modern-day cross between Stephen Sondheim and Shakespeare, spreading the Gospel through song and dance, but *Scandalous* is little more than an overblown vanity project.

Every university in America should study *Scandalous* in its theater department. Not as a great musical, but as a model to teach aspiring theatrical wordsmiths, lyricists and composers how *not* to write a Broadway show.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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