



PERFORMANCES OF THE SEASON: (left to right) Jonny Orsini & Nathan Lane in *The Nance*. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

The Nance: Gritty look at '30s burlesque

THE NANCE

Written by Douglas Carter Beane

Directed by Jack O'Brien

Lyceum Theatre

149 West 45th Street

(212-239-6200), www.lct.org

By Scott Harrah

In the 1930s world of burlesque, along with the bump-and-grind strippers and corny jokes, there was usually a “nance,” a giddy stereotype of a flaming homosexual man. Playwright Douglas Carter Beane (*The Little Dog Laughed*) explores the world of these pariahs from the burlesque era with a darkly comic but often eye-opening and disturbing perspective, showing just how far society has come since then. In addition, there’s simply no better actor around to portray a “nance” than the legendary Nathan Lane as Chauncey Miles

We already know Mr. Lane can camp it up with zeal on Broadway, as he has in countless shows over the years. It has been years since Mr. Lane has had such a showy, honest role (best to forget his Gomez in *The Addams Family*) and been able to use his talent to such a genuine sincerity. However, the pleasant surprise here is Jonny Orsini, making his Broadway debut as young Ned, a naïve guy from upstate who meets Chauncey at a Greenwich Village Horn and Hardart Automat. The two have a one-night stand that leads to a romance, and eventually Ned joins Chauncey’s burlesque revue. Mr. Orsini is a total natural in the role, and there is a winning candor and haunting yearning in the delivery of his lines. Anyone who can hold his own opposite Mr. Lane is a standout.

The Nance covers the discrimination and persecution that gays faced in 1937, a time when they were called “perverts,” gay bars and straight burlesque clubs were often raided by police, and two men could be arrested just for meeting in a restaurant. Things in general were not easy in New York City for anyone who was gay. Then Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia was on a crusade to shut down the city’s burlesque houses.

Mr. Carter Beane covers all the historical territory at a time when ethnic slurs about the Irish, Italians and Jews were staples of humor in burlesque at the Irving Place Theatre. Lewis J. Stadlen brilliantly portrays funnyman and owner of the Irving Place, Efram, a guy who isn’t exactly an advocate for people like Chauncey. He hurls out such zingers as “Did you hear that Abraham Lincoln was really Jewish? He got shot right in the temple.” *Ba-da-bum*.

The scantily clad ladies of the show are also caricatures of burlesque fixtures. There’s the salty Communist Sylvie (Cady Huffman), Latina spitfire Carmen (Andréa Burns), and blond bimbo Joan (Jenni Barber). Their stories are typical and their characters are mostly one-dimensional, as they are meant to be. They play their burlesque window dressing roles to perfection.

However, this is the story of Chauncey and his self-hatred and ultimate tragic downfall. He destroys everything in sight, including Ned, and their attempt to make a gay relationship work in such a challenging and unsympathetic time. All the past clichés about gays being self-loathing are present in Chauncey, but Mr. Lane infuses the character with enough depth to keep him believable. He's a self-proclaimed Republican and a conservative, but for some reason indulges in homosexual promiscuity, further frustrating and pushing Ned away.

Besides the main plot of Chauncey and Ned, Mr. Carter Beane uses a nice mix of actual burlesque routines, music, and ladies doing their striptease acts. John Lee Beatty's revolving set is gorgeous, taking us from the Irving Place Theatre to the Automat and Chauncey's modest Hell's Kitchen apartment. Ann Roth's costumes evoke the seamy grind-house fashions of 1930s Manhattan.

Tony Award-winning director Jack O'Brien (*The Coast of Utopia*) keeps the action moving briskly in Act I, but things slow down a bit in Act II, and there could have been some trimming of unnecessary moments toward the end. Regardless, Mr. O'Brien manages to evoke genuine onstage chemistry between Mr. Lane and Mr. Orsini, and the duo's final scene is heartbreaking, cathartic and rings with truth, making *The Nance* one of the better Broadway shows in this overcrowded spring season.

Edited by Scott Harrah

Published April 22, 2013

Reviewed at press performance on April 21, 2013

Copyright © April 22 2013, StageZine.com