

ARTS

'SIMPLY SONDHEIM' WILL MAKE YOU FEEL MERRILY AND MUCH MORE

BY GAIL CHOOCHAN
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Almost a year has gone by since Signature finished its world-première run of the musical “Gun & Powder” and had to cut short the play “Easy Women Smoking Loose Cigarettes” on its smaller stage, right before theaters across the country dimmed their lights due to the emerging coronavirus.

Now, Signature Theatre is blazing back with “Simply Sondheim,” which is guaranteed to fill the heart of any musical lover who’s been longing for live entertainment. There’s no telling when the industry will be back up and running again, leaving theaters “learning to bounce” on this new journey, as Sondheim puts it in “Merrily We Roll Along / Bounce”—a fitting first song in this digital musical revue.

Kicking off its “Signature Features” mainstage season, “Simply Sondheim” is the first of the five fully produced shows that will be released through the year and available for viewing through Marquee TV. The show was filmed over three days by Chiet Productions, with the theater taking precautions to keep their cast and crew safe.

Several of Signature’s regular performers have been enlisted and are wonderfully supported by musical director Jon Kalbfleisch and a 16-member orchestra. This show is bursting with energy and talent, and it’s so great to see these performers back on-stage and doing what they love.

And just to make “Simply Sondheim” even more special: Signature has brought in a few guests—some of whom have appeared on its stage before. There’s Broadway star Norm Lewis, who’s had quite a year starring in Spike Lee’s “Da 5



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MUELLER

Tracy Lynn Olivera, Awa Sal Secka and Katie Mariko Murray brighten up these gray winter days with the songs of Stephen Sondheim. Signature’s musical revue is now on Marquee TV.

Bloods”; Emily Skinner, a Tony nominee and Richmond native; Solea Pfeiffer, from “Gun & Powder” and “Hamilton”; and Conrad Ricamora, from “The King and I” and “How to Get Away with Murder.”

“Simply Sondheim,” directed and choreographed by Matthew Gardiner, showcases more than 30 works from the beloved composer’s extensive catalog with new orchestrations by longtime Sondheim collaborator Jonathan Tunick. It’s one glorious and immensely satisfying performance as the singers—bathed in the glow of seemingly hundreds of lights—share songs from musicals, such as “A Little Night Music,” “Passion,” “Company,” “Assassins” and “Into the Woods,” with one entry being a sweet and funny bit involving Milky White the cow.

Musical numbers reflect a variety of songs from Sondheim’s career: from the sunny



Broadway star Norm Lewis is one of the headliners of ‘Simply Sondheim,’ which showcases more than 30 of his songs.

doon-doo-doon of “You Could Drive a Person Crazy,” delivered cheerfully by Awa Sal Secka, Tracy Lynn Olivera and Kate Mariko Murray, to the torch

song pairing of “Losing My Mind/Not a Day Goes By,” with a riveting and deeply affecting performance from Skinner and Pfeiffer. Another heartbreaker: Olivera’s crushingly beauti-

TUNE IN

Online: “Simply Sondheim,” Signature Theatre. Streaming on demand through March 26 on Marquee TV. \$35 single tickets; \$200 subscriptions available for “Signature Features.” sigtheatre.org.

ful take on “Every Day a Little Death,” about a wife suffering through an unfaithful marriage. So good, it deserves a rewind.

Other highlights include a firecracker performance from Skinner as she tears through the iconic Sondheim tune “The Ladies Who Lunch” and Lewis’ powerfully moving “Being Alive,” both from “Company.” Hearing songs like these makes you want to be back in the theater so badly to hear them in person.

However, it’s not only the powerhouse numbers that make a big impact; “I Wish I Could Forget You,” one of the show’s quieter selections, is also a standout. Secka, who has the most comforting vocals, is mesmerizing to watch as she takes the lead in the achingly sad song from “Passion,” assisted by her fellow cast members.

“Simply Sondheim” has a little bit of everything and conjures up so many feelings of happiness, heartache and hope. It’s impossible to get all your favorite songs in there; in retrospect, adding “Send in the Clowns” would have probably wrecked me.

The past year has been fraught with many challenges, and “Simply Sondheim” offers a soothing musical escape with lyrics to some songs hitting a little differently during these times.

As Donna Migliaccio’s Mrs. Lovett, the kooky pie baker from “Sweeney Todd,” would say, “Ah, sir, times is hard,” but Signature is sure enough doing its darndest to make the world a brighter place—at least for a few hours.

'BRIGHT STAR' SHINES

BY GAIL CHOOCHAN
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

After months and months of waiting in the wings, it's safe to say that "Bright Star" was worth the wait. Steve Martin and Edie Brickell's feel-good bluegrass musical is finally getting its chance to shine at the Riverside Center for the Performing Arts, and it is absolutely beaming with talent.

The Tony-nominated musical, which also enjoyed a brief run at the Kennedy Center, is giving local audiences an opportunity to experience this sweeping story about love and redemption, heart-break and hope.

Set in 1940s North Carolina, "Bright Star" revolves around Alice Murphy, one of Asheville's top literary editors whose own story is quite a page-turner, and her connection with Billy Cane, a young soldier who has just returned from the war. After meeting the aspiring writer and taking a chance on him, Alice begins to reflect on her past growing up in a small town, her first love, Jimmy Ray, as well as the darkest chapter of her life. In the beautifully staged number "Way Back in the Day," Alice brings audiences with her back to Zebulon as she seamlessly transitions from a buttoned-up professional to a spirited barefoot teenager—her voice soaring as she shares her happier beginnings.

Riverside has assembled a terrific cast and orchestra to take on Martin and Brickell's Appalachian tale, which was inspired by a true event. (It's better not to reveal too much detail so you can experience this wallop of a story yourself.)

With one of the biggest voices in the cast, Adrienne Hick is a radiating presence onstage as she balances her portrayal of adult Alice and young Alice in flashbacks. She successfully conveys the carefree innocence of youth, as well as the pain from unspeakable loss and the strength to keep going.

As Jimmy Ray, Douglas Ullman Jr. delivers a strong performance as the mayor's son who doesn't want to follow in his footsteps and step out on his own outside of Zebulon. He shares great chemistry with Hick's Alice, whether they're singing the flirtatious number "Whoa, Mama" or the powerful tear-jerker "I Had a Vision," about what their life could have been like. His song "Heartbreaker," during an emotional father-and-son scene, is one of the show's most searing moments.

Danny Martin as Billy and Evan Ber-



Adrienne Hick and Douglas Ullman Jr. share a sweet moment.

IF YOU GO

"Bright Star," Riverside Center for the Performing Arts, 95 Riverside Pkwy., Fredericksburg. Wednesdays through Sundays through Oct. 31. \$55-\$75. 540/370-4300; riversidedct.com

tram as his childhood friend Margo, who's been harboring feelings for him, share some charming moments in a parallel but much lighter storyline. While Margo's fully supportive of him chasing his literary dreams in the big city, she's hoping he'll come back home to her.

"Bright Star" is filled with plenty of ear-pleasing musical gems, from Margo's sweetly sung ballad "Asheville" (one of my favorites) to Jimmy Ray and Alice's moving duet "What Could Be Better" to the fun toe-tapping bar song "Another Round."

The music, featuring orchestrations by August Eriksmoen, is such a big player in this production that it is wonderful to see the musicians alongside the performers. Music director and keyboardist Carson Eubank, Mark Barnett on banjo/guitar and Brad Gunson on guitar/mandolin are prominently on display in a cabin on a revolving stage, with other musicians seated on both sides.

Frank Foster's rustic set design holds many neat details, such as the miniature train moving along a railroad track above the stage and drop-down screens, and the townsfolk holding flickering candles looks pretty at night in Michael Jarett's lighting design.

With Patrick A'Hearn's tight and loving direction, Riverside's "Bright Star" is a piercing reminder of what theater audiences all over have been missing out on during the pandemic and live theater's power to move people's hearts.



Danny Martin as Billy
with Stephanie V.

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AN EXHILARATING 'HADESTOWN' IS ONE HELL OF A RIDE

BY GAIL CHOOCHAN
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

“Hadestown,” currently burning up the stage at the Kennedy Center’s Opera House, is the perfect show to awaken the performing arts venue from a long pandemic slumber. The Tony-winning megahit about Greek lovers above and below ground kick-starts the site’s jam-packed 2021–22 season. It’s been well over a year and half, after all, so it’s making up for lost time.

Singer–songwriter Anaïs Mitchell, along with artistic collaborator and director Rachel Chavkin, have conjured up an intoxicating world that reimagines the classic tale of Orpheus and Eurydice as a contem-

IF YOU GO

“Hadestown,” The Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C. Oct. 13-31. \$45–\$175. Masks and proof of vaccination (or negative COVID-19 test) required. kennedy-center.org

porary one, set in a New Orleans-inspired speak-easy while an industrial city pulsates underneath their feet. “Hadestown,” which ruled over the 2019 Tonys with eight awards, started out as a theater project in 2006, with a concert album release a few years later.

Rich with memorable folk and jazz numbers, “Hadestown” is vibrantly brought to life by a hard-

working cast and onstage orchestra.

For those not well versed in Greek mythology, Hermes (a charismatic Levi Kreis) makes it clear early on in the rousing first musical number, “Road to Hell,” that the story is a sad tale but also one of love. The shiny-suited god of travels and messages serves as narrator and guardian of our fresh-faced hero.

Orpheus, a penniless dreamer who wears his heart on his sleeve, and Eurydice, a hungry, streetwise runaway, strike up a sweet connection after his too-forward greeting (“Come home with me”). When the untrusting Eurydice questions why she should

SEE HADESTOWN, 12

HADESTOWN

► FROM 10

marry him, Hermes tells her he would make her feel alive. But it's going to be a bumpy journey for these kids, where the seasons have fallen out of rhythm—there's no spring or fall—and food and firewood are scarce.

The lyre player, who happens to be a muse's son, tells Eurydice he's working on a song that would make spring come again, a song that's "so beautiful that it brings the world back into tune." Seems that trouble is brewing in the underworld and Persephone's unpredictable appearances above are rocking the balance. It doesn't help that her controlling husband, Hades, arrives on the train to collect her early. A railroad track links the worlds together, where there is much



T CHARLES ERICKSON

Kimberly Marable brings sizzle to the stage as Persephone, queen of the underworld, in the 'Hadestown' national tour.

poverty above while Hades' corporate kingdom is living off resources pulled from the ground.

There are two love stories on display in "Hadestown": the

pure and blossoming one between Orpheus and Eurydice, and the rocky one between Hades and Persephone that's grown tired and bitter over the years. When Hades feels

his wife is ungrateful for what he's given her, he decides to look elsewhere for someone who will appreciate him (enter a hungry Eurydice). The young woman soon discovers Hades town isn't what it's cracked up to be—with soulless workers toiling away on the factory floor to build the big boss's wall separating the haves from the have-nots—and hopes her beloved will come and find her.

Nicholas Barasch and Morgan Siobhan Green are wonderfully paired as the young lovers, who endure so much—including a trip to hell—to be together again. "Wait For Me," the musical's flashy epic number, is packed with feeling as Orpheus embarks on a long journey underground to rescue Eurydice—Barasch's voice soaring through the darkness as lamps swing high from above. And he's downright angelic-sounding on the sweetly sung

"Epic," detailing Hades and Persephone's legendary love. Green's underworld ballad, "Flowers," a slow and simmering reflection on what she's left behind, is also a beauty.

As Persephone, Kimberly Marable is a blazing force of nature as she delivers a scene-stealing performance, whether she's kicking back with the living above ground with a drink in hand or singing in her club down below when Hades isn't looking. Kevyn Morrow's Hades is fun to watch as the slick, pinstriped king whose voice reaches unbelievable depths. And who could forget the three sassy, harmonizing Fates (Belén Moyano, Bex Odorisio and Shea Renne), who are almost always slinking around.

The show's creators have brilliantly modernized an ancient Greek myth—one of sadness, romance and hope—and the result is heavenly.