

ARTS | THEATER REVIEW

A striking 'Swept Away' lands at Arena

New maritime musical features songs by The Avett Brothers

GAIL CHOOCHAN
The Free Lance-Star

After a shipwreck leaves four men stranded at sea, clinging together in a small lifeboat, "Swept Away" explores what lengths people would go to survive while also raising the question "How would you fare?"

The musical, which had its world premiere at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre last year, is hoisting its sails once again — this time at the Arena Stage in Washington. And the way this epic tale on the high seas plays out in the smaller Kreeger Theater is astounding. It's actually quite fitting considering the intimate nature of John Logan's story — making every movement and emotion that more striking.

"Swept Away" follows a whaling ship off the coast of New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1888, and grips audiences tightly with its weighty story of survival, brotherhood, faith and forgiveness, and doesn't let go until the show's final breath.

Directed by Michael Mayer, whose work includes the current "Little Shop of Horrors" and "Spring Awakening," "Swept Away" reunites the Washington native with "Spring Awakening" star John Gallagher Jr. The actor won the 2007 Tony for Best Featured Actor in a Musical for the Duncan Sheik coming-of-age rock musical.

Here, Gallagher stars in a musical that celebrates the work of another pop artist. "Swept Away" marks the first musical for the acclaimed roots-rock band the Avett Brothers. If you're not familiar with their sound, get ready for an exhilarating crash course.

The musical opens with Mate (Gallagher) lying in a hospital bed in a tuberculosis ward, visited by three ghosts from his whaling past. Bathed in eerie lighting, the Captain, Big Brother and Little Brother surround the dying man and ask him if he has told their story. Audiences are then transported back in time as their ship prepares for its last ride (it's been sold to a wrecking yard) at a time when the whaling trade is dying. Rugged and world-weary sailors are joined by a pair



JULIETA CERVANTES

'Swept Away,' the new musical from writer John Logan and the Avett Brothers, is celebrating its East Coast premiere at the Arena Stage in Washington.



'Swept Away' follows the journey of four men stranded at sea after a shipwreck. Pictured: Adrian Blake Enscoe (Little Brother), Stark Sands (Big Brother), John Gallagher Jr. (Mate) and Wayne Duvall (Captain).

of clean-cut farmers: the idealistic Little Brother seeking adventures beyond the farm and the faithful and overprotective Big Brother, who gets pulled aboard during his attempts to bring him home and back to his senses.

The production boasts a flawless cast, led by strong performances by Gallagher as the charismatic Mate, whose easygoingness belies a seedier side; and Stark

Sands and Adrian Blake Enscoe as Big Brother and Little Brother. The brothers provide the story's emotional core, and the actors' scenes together are the most heart-wrenching in the show. Rounding out the four survivors, Wayne Duvall is solid as the stern Captain who's been relegated to the sidelines when disaster strikes.

Music and lyrics by the Avett Brothers take the story to another level, from buoy-

If you go

WHAT: "Swept Away"

WHERE: Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater, 1101 Sixth St. SW, Washington, D.C.

WHEN: Extended through Jan. 14.

MORE INFO: arenastage.org.

ant foot-stomping ensemble numbers to introspective solos. The soundtrack pulls from the Grammy-winning band's extensive catalog, including songs such as "A Gift for Melody Anne," "Hard Worker," "Nothing Short of Thankful" and of course, "Swept Away" — all from their 2002 album "Mignonette," which was inspired by the 1884 sinking of an English yacht. "Murder in the City," a playful reflection on family, and the sweetly sung "No Hard Feelings" beautifully work into the story.

"Swept Away" packs a lot of storytelling in its 90 minutes but seems to weigh heavier on the songs than character development; the Brothers are fleshed out the most. I would have loved to learn more about these men, and maybe even highlight a few faces from the massive ensemble. There's great talent back there and a missed opportunity to enrich the storytelling — it's a shame they're underused.

The musical also wavers in tone, rocking back and forth like the bulky wooden ship navigating the rough waters of the Atlantic. For a show that eventually heads into a really dark place, there's a surprising amount of light-heartedness.

Casting these book criticisms aside, "Swept Away" is still worthy of the ride with its piercing performances and gorgeous set design by Rachel Hauck, who's able to create this grand whaling vessel and the illusion of a minuscule boat lost at sea. Along with impressive lighting work by Kevin Adams, the musical features one of the most jaw-dropping set moments I've witnessed in a while.

With an enviable cast and creative crew, and musical backing by the Avett Brothers, "Swept Away" hopes to set course for Broadway. This is a well-polished production, but it needs some fine-tuning in the story department to get it in ship-shape condition.

https://fredericksburg.com/entertainment/review-kennedy-centers-glorious-sunset-boulevard-shines-up-a-classic/article_e216d198-a4cc-11ed-a1d0-d79f92991159.html

Review: Kennedy Center's glorious 'Sunset Boulevard' shines up a classic

GAIL CHOOCHAN The Free Lance–Star

Feb 4, 2023



Derek Klena and Stephanie J. Block star in Andrew Lloyd Webber's 'Sunset Boulevard' at the Kennedy Center.

JEREMY DANIEL

GAIL CHOOCHAN The Free Lance–Star

Magic is in the making at the Kennedy Center in Washington right now.

After last fall's dynamite staging of "Guys and Dolls," starring a long list of theatrical heavyweights (James Monroe Iglehart! Jessie Mueller! Phillipa Soo! Steven Pasquale!), the Broadway Center Stage series returns with another knock-out production.

And again, the Kennedy Center has hit the jackpot with this cast featuring stars from stage and screen.

Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Sunset Boulevard" is not often produced like others in his repertory, such as "Cats" or "Phantom," which is soon ending its historic run on Broadway. This show — onstage through Feb. 8 for a limited run — offers audiences a rare opportunity to delight in this spectacular tale of twisted love and intrigue, and seriously, one of the best performances I've ever seen onstage.

Based on Billy Wilder's film noir, "Sunset Boulevard" follows a struggling young writer and his warped relationship with a forgotten movie star looking to make her big return (she doesn't like the word comeback). The cash-strapped Joe Gillis, who is trying to lose a couple of men hot on his tail, ends up driving onto the estate belonging to an eccentric silent film actress (a funeral for her pet monkey is commencing upon his arrival). He agrees to help with her script, intended for Cecil B. DeMille, and in turn, she takes care of his lodging and finances. Win-win, right?

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Friendship turns into love, before delving into something darker, filled with obsession, bitterness, jealousy and ultimately, rage.

Tony winner Stephanie J. Block delivers a tour de force performance as Norma Desmond, a tragic character teetering between fantasy and reality. She's absolutely mesmerizing as she brings this icon to life — dramatic twists of the hands and all. There's verve in every move and bold confidence in every line. And let's not forget about those piercing, aching looks.

It's hard not to feel for her as she slips into her silver screen heaven, especially with Block's breathtaking delivery of "As We Never Said Goodbye." Sitting on a studio chair, Norma reminisces about her glory days and dreams of her second act while Hollywood bustles

around her. Then as she's leaving the soundstage, Norma slightly tilts the head of a young actress during a scene so the cameras can capture her face better.

Derek Klena, a Tony nominee most recently sending hearts aflutter in "Moulin Rouge," commands the stage as Joe and is perfectly matched with Block to convey this complicated relationship. His second-act rendition of "Sunset Boulevard," a showcase for his powerhouse vocals, is absolutely thrilling. Other standouts in this all-around perfect cast: the vocally stunning Nathan Gunn as Norma's intensely loyal butler Max who's always lurking about. And Auli'i Cravalho, the voice of Disney's "Moana," is a treat here as the sweet script reader Betty Schaeffer, who's engaged to Joe's buddy Artie (a wonderful Michael Maliakel from Broadway's "Aladdin") and later develops feelings for the writer.

"Sunset Boulevard," meticulously directed by Sammi Cannold, has brought old Hollywood glamour to the venue's Eisenhower Theater. Costume designer Alejo Vietti's decadent wardrobe pieces offer a striking contrast to the swirling black and white images that play in the background. The jewel-toned frocks and candy-colored dresses donned by the female ensemble are bright and fun, and each of Norma's looks deserve its own award from the moment she makes her first glittery appearance standing high on the staircase to her final bow with that statement gold headpiece.

Paul Tate DePoo III, who's behind the scenic and projection design, immerses audiences in this faraway time, from a Hollywood studio to Norma's mansion. Grand wooden staircases bookend the stage, with large crystal chandeliers heightening the home's grandeur. And those cool nighttime driving scenes are cleverly pulled off with handheld lights floating in the darkness.

This may be a staged concert, but the Kennedy Center is firing on all cylinders with this devastating masterpiece about a fading film star left behind by Hollywood as it enters a new chapter.

Norma Desmond is a force, and so is Stephanie J. Block. These are two leading ladies who will not be forgotten anytime soon.

If You Go

"**Sunset Boulevard**," The Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C. Through Feb. 8. kennedy-center.org

In “King of the Yees,” the line between reality and fantasy becomes blurred, as the playwright turns into the protagonist.

GAIL CHOOCHAN *The Free Lance-Star*

Lauren Yee is a name to remember, having two of her works brought to area stages back to back. First, “Cambodian Rock Band” this summer at Arena Stage in Washington, and now, “King of the Yees” at Signature Theatre in Arlington. Both shows deal with the dynamics of father–daughter relationships, however “King of the Yees” hits closer to home for the playwright.

Yee weaves her imaginative story with Chinese history and culture, adding real-life people, like her dad, and otherworldly ones. Guided by Jennifer Chang's sharp direction, the play sends audiences on an exhilarating — and at times confusing — adventure through San Francisco's Chinatown and beyond.

Filled with humor, familial tension and surprising depth, "King of the Yees" is onstage in Signature's Ark theater. The smaller venue is the ideal spot for this epic yet personal story to play out.

In this metatheatrical comedy, an actress playing Lauren Yee and an actor playing her dad, Larry Yee, take to the stage, before the real ones make their entrances. Lauren is running a rehearsal of her new play, but it's not long before her father bursts in suddenly dropping a box of campaign items, and completely derails the rehearsal and plants his own ideas into her show. It needs an erhu player, a lion dance, a face changer! His presence is welcome by the two actors, who are entertained by the easygoing smiling man and his stories.

To Lauren's surprise, Larry has retired from his telephone company job so he can freely continue his “hatchet man” work for real-life politician Leland Yee (no relation). The election is incredibly important to him as he puts up signs, passes out stickers and tries to get out the vote. His Chinese heritage is also important to him, and making sure the story of their community won't be erased.

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The frustrations between Lauren and her father come to a boiling point over her work and life choices (she's moving to Germany, she's not sure about having kids), just hours before his 60th birthday party. More drama comes when the local news reports on Leland Yee's bribery and money laundering schemes and then, Larry goes missing.

Lauren embarks on a frantic, mystical journey to find her father and get past the large mysterious red doors to the Yee Fung Toy Family Association, which only open for true Yees. Along the way, she encounters a bearded acupuncturist, a hard-as-nails liquor store worker and the Lum Elders. In order to find her dad, Lauren must procure three things by sundown (think “Into the Woods”): the strongest whiskey, the sweetest oranges and the loudest firecrackers.

Helen Q. Huang's costumes for the three wise ones, appearing as mask-wearing elderly residents, are uncannily accurate here. With their mishmash styles, bucket hats and fanny packs, it's the clunky brown boat shoes that draw my attention — favored by my dad and many older male members of my family. However, a different item evokes a more powerful response: a

button reading “Stop Asian Hate,” immediately recalling stories of elderly people who were brutally attacked during the pandemic.

In a secondary storyline, the actors playing Larry and Lauren in the show within the show, are holed up in a dark room waiting to be called back to rehearsal. In these comedic snippets, we learn that “Lauren” is not even Chinese, but Korean and adopted. “Larry” reveals he's three quarters Chinese and one quarter Irish, which leads to a lesson in accents, and discussions on finding acting work and having or not having families.

Signature's production of "King of the Yees" is perfectly cast, with tremendous performances coming from Ashley D. Nguyen as Lauren and Grant Chang as Larry. They believably convey the complicatedness and chaos of this father–daughter relationship, as well as their deep love for one another. Watching Lauren and Larry connect and come to a better understanding of each other's lives produces piercing emotions in the show's final moments.

As Actors 1-3, Jacob Yeh, Sylvia Kwan and Nicholas Yenson perform a variety of outlandish characters, which include the Model Ancestor (emphasis on the model) and the real-life gangster Shrimp Boy. One of the show’s wildest scenes is the cartoonish over-the-top gunfight between Shrimp Boy and the feds, played out in slow-mo style with flying white doves.

These off-the-wall moments are just part of the show’s irresistible charm. “King of the Yees” is hilarious and haphazard, but it’s full of heart in an exploration of identity and rediscovering one's heritage.

If You Go

"King of the Yees," 4200 Campbell Ave., Arlington. Through Oct. 22. 703/820-9771; sigtheatre.org