

Rocky The Musical Has the Heart of the Original Movie

Written by Aaron Tallent

Tuesday, 18 February 2014 11:45



Actor/writer Sylvester Stallone and director John G. Avildsen may not have set out to make the quintessential sports movie with the first “*Rocky*,” but that is exactly what they did thanks to a wonderful script, great performances, budgeting decisions that worked and an ending that brought the crowd to its feet. When Stallone decided to bring the 1976 Academy Award winner for Best Picture to Broadway, visions of the musical adaptations of “

Carrie

” and “

The Wedding Singer

” entered people’s heads. Yet the end result is an adaptation that captures the winning formula of the original film and ends with a standing crowd.

The show, which originally ran in Hamburg, Germany, two years ago, opened to previews in New York City on February 13 at the Winter Garden Theatre, which ironically is only a block away from the old site of Jack Dempsey’s Restaurant. Previews for Broadway shows allow for the cast, director and production crew to work out technical difficulties and tweak dialogue and lyrics, but it is already apparent that the final product will be a crowd-pleaser.

The core cast of the original film created timeless characters with the first one. It is hard to forget Talia Shire transitioning Adrien from shy pet shop clerk to Rocky’s rock, Burgess Meredith’s Mickey going from loathing the Italian Stallion to loving him like a son, the self-destruction that Burt Young brings to Paulie and the larger-than-life presence Carl Weathers gave Apollo Creed. Fortunately, the musical’s cast captures the spirit of these characters without becoming caricatures of them. Margo Seibert’s Adrien is more of a late bloomer than the fragile creature of the film. Beloved character actor Dakin Matthews brings a softer touch to Mickey, and while Danny Mastrogio’s Paulie is still a despicable drunk, he brings a tad bit more sex appeal to the role than Young did. In addition, Carl Weathers’ Apollo

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Creed seemed to wink at the camera a la Muhammad Ali when he would make his audacious statements, but Terence Archie gives the role more of a P.T. Barnum feel.

However, the most impressive feat in this area comes in Andy Karl's portrayal of the Italian Stallion, as he gives his own sensitivity and direction to one of the most iconic characters in movie history. What's just as impressive is that both he and Archie can hold seamless musical notes while doing pull-ups.

A strong expansion from the original cast of characters is the addition of pet shop owner Gloria, wonderfully played by Jennifer Mudge. A minor character in the film series, Gloria brings both a sense of community to Rocky and Adrien's South Philadelphia neighborhood and fun that was missing from the original film. The one complaint is that she has an on-again, off-again relationship with Paulie, a move that seems beneath her character.

An adaptation of "*Rocky*" would not be complete without a set that allows for training montages and the final fight and this one delivers. Chris Barreca's sets are a surefire Tony Award nominee for Best Scenic Design in a Musical, as it allows for its hero to run all over Philly, including up the steps of its Museum of Art. The fight scene at the end includes audience participation that gives the feel of sitting ringside at a boxing match and is one of the most elaborate set pieces every featured in a Broadway musical.

Aficionados of the "*Rocky*" series will be pleased to see the variations from the original film as well. For example, Avildsen and Stallone had originally planned for Rocky to come to his realization that all he could do was go the distance with Creed by having him watch footage of his fights in the film. The plan was scrapped when they realized that they did not have the budget to film Weathers in the ring with other opponents. For the musical, the fight films are used, but they are not of Archie. They are blurred back-shots of Marvelous Marvin Hagler.

The musical is not without its weaknesses, most notably in the lyrics, an easy stumbling block for adaptations of movies. While Rocky's pride in the fact that his nose has never been broken adds to the charm of original film, a recurring song titled, "My Nose Ain't Broken" comes across as laughably silly. Plus, "*Eye of the Tiger*" made for awesome introductions to the third and fourth "*Rocky*" movies, but it has sounded corny every time it has been played since. Sadly, the musical's training montage is no exception.

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Nevertheless, the reason the first "*Rocky*" spawned five sequels is because fans knew what to expect with each one, and with the exception of the fifth, they came away pleased. The musical delivers on that same promise, but more importantly, it surprises its audience too.

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Radam G says:

Heads UP! SS is making a new Rocky. In this up-coming Big Screen version, he is training the late Apollo Creed's heavyweight son. Expect for my son and I to get bit parts in the flick. Holla!

brownsugar says:

An Ocsar worthy performance is no doubt forthcoming I'm sure. RG.

amayseng says:

RG hook me up with a day on set?!!!!?

Radam G says:

Hopefully! I gotta give it up to Sylvester Steal-syet -- I mean Stallone.

In his first "Rocky," he snatched the late, great Smokin' Joe Frazier's beat up on cow meat hung up in a slaughterhouse. He made Carl Weather's character Apollo Creed very GOAT Ali. And he made his girlfriend Adrene very much like the "Cinderella Man('s)" wife.

In this upcoming cut of "Rocky," his spinning off the death of ex champion Cory Spinks's mother. And he is taking a bit from Top Notch Trainer Freddie Roach.

This Rocky that is training his late opponent's son has Parkinson's like damages from boxing.

And this son of Apollo Creed will win the heavyweight title back to the glory for Kanos.

Wow! Moving are amazing. Holla!

Radam G says:

Maybe one of the scribes can do that. I'm sure that one of them will be grabbed for a bit part. Holla!

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Radam G says:

This flick is apparently the only way that Yanks can now beat the K-bros/docs. Holla!

amayseng says:

Gotta love SS. he was my hero growing up, I still dig him.

the Roast says:

My production company, La Roasta, just aquired the rights to "Sling Blade." Maybe we could turn it into a musical. It might be hard for me to sing in that Billy Bob voice.