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Promises, Promises (review)

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Christopher Sieber, the Reverend Canon Thomas P. Miller, S.T.M. Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, and Wilson Jermaine Heredia in *Pablo and Andrew at the Altar of Words*, along with other cast members from *Standing on Ceremony: The Gay Marriage Plays*. (Photo: Gabrielle Sierra, courtesy of Broadwayworld.com.)

a pair of black civil rights veterans argue over the marriage movement's controversial lineage with their struggle, love between a same-sex couple was affirmed by the endorsement of gay marriage. These moments, represented in quiet and barely acknowledged asides, may be read either as the "real" argument for same-sex marriage or as the inscription of sex as an act affirmed within marriage's confines—indeed, these two readings may not be incompatible.

Complementing these more personal expressions of the issue, Paul Rudnick's *The Gay Agenda* and Doug Wright's *On Facebook* used comedy to register the exhaustion of queers and their allies in combating the hypocritical assertion that opposing marriage equality is not "discrimination." Rudnick aimed his typically eviscerating satire against a bubbly, high-strung Ohio housewife giving a "Focus on the Family"—style speech. She explained how she "loves" her "same-sex couple" neighbors except for their "Gay Agenda," which manifested as a disembodied "gay voice" that, whenever the men were around, made catty comments about her dishware and her shoes. *On Facebook* dramatized a Facebook thread in which Beverly, an opponent of gay marriage, quarreled with the author's online compatriots while insisting, "I'm sure we could all be friends." Wright's play presented a classic gay marriage consensus: a variety of genders, races, sexual identities, and romantic entanglements standing up against oppression.

This vision of a unified queer constituency motivated by the salvific potential of gay marriage was

delicately subverted, however, in Moisés Kaufman's *London Mosquitoes*, perhaps the finest play of the evening. An elderly man (played by Judd Hirsch) delivered a eulogy for his late lover in which he explained that getting married would have made their "fifty years" together seem invalid. This moment was a brief, dismissive detour in a broader narrative about human progress, coded in evolutionary terms, that concluded with the dying lover's insistence that, as same-sex lovers, "We can't mate with the rest of the world. . . . We're the new species. . . . We will save the world." Without fanfare, Kaufman's play quietly dismissed the link between same-sex marriage and its most common discursive companions, progress and gay self-affirmation.

The question of what to do with the variety of affective and political positions expressed in *Standing on Ceremony* was answered, in part, by the evening's conclusion. By presenting José Rivera's *Pablo and Andrew at the Altar of Words* as the evening's finale, the broader dramaturgy of *Standing on Ceremony* recalled the final moments of *Something Blue* and *Let Them Eat Cake*: the resolution of ambivalent feelings through a critical but sincere act of support for gay marriage. The cast members from the other plays returned to witness the fictional marriage of Pablo and Andrew. Rivera's couple rewrote the language of their ceremony to celebrate their particular expectations of wedded life—including "utterly nasty" sexual indulgence. The play's, and the evening's, final line innocently marked an honest way forward for reluctant queers faced with the seemingly/hopefully inevitable march toward marriage equality. After Pablo's last line, Andrew mischievously turned to the congregation and said, "He improvised that last part."

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PROMISES, PROMISES. Book by Neil Simon. Music by Burt Bacharach. Lyrics by Hal David. Directed and choreographed by Rob Ashford. Broadway Theatre, New York City. 10 July 2010.

Nostalgia reigns as the zeitgeist of 2010. In its first Broadway revival, the 1968 musical *Promises, Promises*, which is set in New York, speaks to an American audience feverishly watching television's *Mad Men* and gazing at a more prosperous past. While his production capitalizes on the musical's vintage appeal, Rob Ashford's staging is hardly enveloped in a rosy, nostalgic haze. The revival is sensitively



Sean Hayes (Chuck Baxter) in *Promises, Promises*. (Photo: Joan Marcus.)

attuned to the tonal nuances of *Promises, Promises*, based on Billy Wilder's serio-comic 1960 classic film *The Apartment*. Without undermining the slapstick and one-liners that pepper Neil Simon's satiric book, or the syncopated buoyancy of its Burt Bacharach-Hal David score, Ashford's *Promises, Promises* foregrounds the musical's cynical undercurrents as a corporate Faust story.

The "promises" of the title demand moral compromises from both sexes. Executive dining room waitress Fran Kubelik (Kristin Chenoweth) holds a torch for J. D. Sheldrake (Tony Goldwyn), the company CEO who repeatedly promises—and fails—to leave his wife for her. Sheldrake's secret liaisons with the self-destructive Fran occur in the apartment of meek accountant Chuck Baxter (Sean Hayes). In exchange for lending trusting space, Chuck ascends the corporate ladder, landing promotions that become meaningless once Chuck learns about Fran and Sheldrake. Musing that "those kind of promises take all the joy from life," the disillusioned junior executive resigns, with Fran at his side.

As a dark vision of 1960s corporate culture, it is difficult not to see the AMC drama *Mad Men* as a likely motivating factor in *Promises, Promises*' reappearance. Despite running for 1,281 performances in 1968, the musical never attained the status of a first-tier classic. Prior to *Mad Men*, *Promises, Promises*

might have seemed a dated, risky prospect in the high-stakes market of Broadway musicals. Yet with the passing of the American Century, our recession-weary country eulogizes a time when the national ego soared skyscraper-high. Although laced with twenty-first-century irony, *Mad Men* exerts a highly nostalgic appeal that has influenced not only Americans' water-cooler conversation, but also television ads and modern fashion. While *Promises, Promises*' characters work at the Consolidated Life Insurance Company, rather than at an ad agency, the musical's lecherous executives, sexually available secretaries, and liquor-stocked desks strongly evoke the television drama. *Promises, Promises*' new setting, which was shuffled from 1968 to 1962, only reinforces comparisons between the two.

While the chronological move has not affected the musical's fundamental dramaturgy (*The Apartment* was set in 1960), it has shaped the costume designs of Bruce Pask, who fills the stage with a prismatic array of jewel-toned dresses and dapper suits. Nostalgia also factors heavily in the production's musical score. Ashford has interpolated the Bacharach-David chart-toppers "I Say a Little Prayer" and "A House Is Not a Home," sung by Fran with little provocation beyond giving Chenoweth two more potential showstoppers. Jonathan Tunick's scaled-down version of his original orchestrations, accented

with ethereal backup vocals, more effectively convey period authenticity.

Like its revival, *Promises, Promises* was conceived at a time of nostalgic ambivalence. Near the beginning of the show, Chuck vows: "I want a lot / And I know I'll get it all / Just like someone who's twice as big as life." A quintessential Broadway anthem of ambition, the Algeresque song is a throwback to older musicals, which are often set in the idealized "wonderful town" of New York City and feature underdogs who make good through pluck and perseverance. Yet in the American musical of the late 1960s, when dark-edged "concept musicals" like *Cabaret* revolutionized the form, the rags-to-riches story lost its optimistic luster. In the age of the Vietnam War, cynicism about institutions, ranging from politics to marriage, transformed Broadway. *Promises, Promises* is a stylistic hybrid: its dramaturgy is steeped in older forms of musical comedy, but its caustic content resonates with the concept musical.

Preserving this formal tension, Ashford balances *Promises, Promises'* nostalgic and comic impulses with a recession-era vision of the corporate world. In part, he accomplishes this through Scott Pask's brilliant mise en scène. While the Consolidated Life office and New York City nightspots are represented with boldly streamlined stylization, the only realistically detailed space is the interior of Chuck's apartment. Here, Pask suggests the contrasting moral dimensions of the private and public spheres. The designer has also liberally borrowed from the aesthetics of the period, including Abstract Expressionism, with geometric mobiles and Henry Moore-esque sculptures adorning the office. Evoking the neon excitement of Big Apple success, Pask simultaneously suggests its undercurrents of hollowness and sterility.

Choreography and casting also play a part in *Promises, Promises'* tonal chiaroscuro. If Ashford's choreography lacks the galvanic verve of Michael Bennett's original, it wittily conveys the tension between banality and libido, conformity and individualist aspiration. In the opening number, Chuck imagines his deskbound co-workers twirling and swiveling around him, soaring from the mundane into a realm of MGM musical fantasy. At the Grapes of Roth nightclub, singles dance in a robotic mating ritual. Chenoweth and Hayes generate performance chemistry through their clashing styles. Although somewhat miscast as the fragile Fran, Chenoweth admirably plays down her dynamo star persona. By contrast, the excellent Hayes and Katie Finneran (as Chuck's barroom "pick-up" Marge) preserve the raucous musical-comedy side of *Promises, Promises*. Balanced against the musical's cynical content are

confectionary production numbers like "Turkey Lurkey Time."

With his eclectic yet focused staging of *Promises, Promises*, Ashford mostly avoids nostalgic complacency. It remains to be seen if Ashford will do the same in March 2011, when he revisits the corporate 1960s with a new Broadway production of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. *Promises, Promises* is not only a revival of a musical, but also the uneasy evocation of an American myth: the prospect of becoming "twice as big as life" in the business world. *Promises, Promises*, like *Mad Men*, is ambivalent about such success stories, even as the show business of Broadway never finishes telling them.

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FENCES. By August Wilson. Directed by Kenny Leon. Cort Theatre, New York City. 18 April 2010.

August Wilson premiered *Fences* at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1985 with the hope of answering those admirers and critics who, while charmed by the poet-cum-playwright's dramatic turns with *Jitney* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, longed for more sophisticated character development and skillful plotting. Directed by Lloyd Richards and vivified by actors James Earl Jones and Mary Alice in the central roles of Troy and Rose Maxson, *Fences* proved a demonstrative rejoinder to Wilson's critics. Indeed, the play elicited praise for Wilson's nuanced rendering of black domestic life in the US before the civil rights movement that at once repeated, revised, and riffed on key moments and movements in African American history. *Fences* subsequently moved to Broadway in 1987, which brought additional acclaim, including the Tony Award for Best Play, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and recognition for Wilson as one of the finest playwrights making and remaking myths for the contemporary theatre.

More than two decades after its New York premier, a long-overdue revival of *Fences* arrived on Broadway in a limited engagement at the Cort Theatre. Directed by Kenny Leon, a frequent interpreter of Wilson's texts, this new production of *Fences* affirmed both the timelessness and timeliness of the play. Leon's production simultaneously foregrounded Wilson's poetic language, beautifully drawn characters, and exacting dramaturgy, while exploiting and resisting the sentimentality that, at times, arrests the text. Countering the cynicism so