

Jolson: The Musical

Allen Theatre

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” Clevelanders are boasting. Not only have we recently been a force to reckon with on the baseball field, but on the boards as well.

Two theatrical events coincided here this month: *Jolson: The Musical* kicked off its pre-Broadway national

the dancing girls and the contrived minstrel shtick; he just needs to connect with his audience. And once he does, he never lets go.

Winner of London’s Olivier Award for Best Musical (1996), *Jolson: The Musical* chronicles the spectacle, scandal, and glory surrounding the original King of Broadway. We see the man behind the legend: a slick operator who steals songs from others, a husband who is more married to his work than his wife, an artist who threatens the powerful Lee Shubert and even rings the White House for a gig. But no matter how manipulative, Jolson the performer prevails, not just entertaining his audience but making love to them. His infamous stunts include stopping in the middle of a scene to ask if the audience wants to see this “hokum” or hear him sing, showing up late, leading a sing-along, and dancing with a woman plucked from the audience. He’s always working the crowd, milking applause at every opportunity — and, in this production, Jolson more than once anachronistically joked that he was competing with the Cleveland Indians down the street for the city’s attention.

The drama of *Jolson: The Musical* is more in its songs than its scenes. The mother-son scene from *The Jazz Singer* is overly sentimental: History is made as dialogue is filmed for the first time, and Jolson is brought to tears as he remembers his mother who died when he was a boy, but it all feels forced. And, as Jolson’s career slows down, so does the script. By Act Two, Jolson’s songs are being used to sell cheese on the radio, and he is on his third wife (Ruby Keeler). Though Donna Lynne Champlin is an accomplished dancer and singer, she is ultimately unconvincing in trying to fill Ruby’s tap shoes —

especially when she divorces Jolson and then helps orchestrate his comeback. Jeff Richards as Jolson’s prissy dresser is a scene-stealer, secretly performing his boss’ numbers in the dressing room. Obligatory historical facts are cranked out during the course of the show; too hastily, Jolson must make amends with Ruby, his agent, and even his band-leader before his triumphant comeback concert at Radio City.

Luckily, it’s worth the wait. The final scene of “The Concert” packs the most punch, as Burstyn/Jolson sings one great tune after another — “Swanee,” “Baby Face,” “Give My Regards to Broadway,” etc. — interacting with the audience between numbers. Then Jolson freezes, a voiceover gives a quick obituary, and on bended knee he sings his last number: “My Mammy.” (Jolson may be best remembered in black face, but that shameful theatrical tradition is not sampled in this production; yet Burstyn left the stage in a Cleveland Indians cap, to some a less overt but still racist symbol.)

The show is tightly staged by director Bill Castellino in cooperation with his design team. A scene change from the East to the West Coast is delightful, as we go from a Broadway theater to an L.A. soundstage in a New York minute; John McClain’s lighting reveals a slew of Hollywood characters — show girls, sheiks, even the Keystone Cops — to the tune of “California, Here I Come.” Joey McKneely’s choreography is fun, while Bruce Harrow’s costumes range from silly sight gags to all-out glamour. James Fouchard’s art deco interior scenes are gorgeous, and his recreation of Radio City is breathtaking. The orchestra, under Art Yelton’s direction, is perfect, never daring to compete with the man onstage.

Al Jolson seems to have been a ruthless, insecure man who knew when and how to cut his losses and come out a winner. *Jolson: The Musical* is a winner, too.

— Christine McBurney



Burstyn with energy: Mike Burstyn plays Al Jolson in a new bio-musical.

tour and simultaneously opened the newly restored Allen Theatre. This was the last of four contiguous vaudeville and movie houses to be renovated here; the 2,500-seat Allen makes the 9,500-seat Playhouse Square complex the second largest performing arts center in the U.S., after Lincoln Center.

Actor Mike Burstyn takes on the bravura role of the “Jazz Singer” in *Jolson: The Musical*, and he is dazzling. A veteran of Yiddish theater and an international stage and screen performer, Burstyn has perfected Jolson’s voice, mannerisms, and charisma. Like Jolson, Burstyn is at his best without