

STAGE SCENE LA

Here's some great news for Cole Porter fans! Even his lesser-known musicals are now being given new life by writers who are fashioning fresh new books to fit the fabulous Porter songs. David Lee's revival of *Can-Can* at the Pasadena Playhouse last year won kudos and awards galore. MTW is beginning its 2008-9 season with a newly rewritten *Silk Stockings*. And MTG (the Musical Theatre Guild) has just presented an absolutely smashing concert staged reading of one of the great Mr. Porter's least familiar musicals, *Out Of This World*, featuring a revised book by Greg MacKellan.

What? You've never heard of *Out Of This World*? No wonder, as it only played for six months on Broadway in 1950. Perhaps one reason for its short run was the book troubles which plagued it. At least three writers were hired to fix Dwight Taylor's original book, but it was not until fairly recently that *Out Of This World* finally got the book it deserves. MacKellan's rewrite of the original works wonders, and given the success of the similarly reconceived *Xanadu* on Broadway, it's not out of the realm of possibility that the new, improved *Out Of This World* might find similar future success.

Just as Douglas Carter Beane has worked wonders with *Xanadu* by camping up the movie's lackluster script, so MacKellan's book sends up the original *Out Of This World* storyline, Greek and Roman mythology, and Hollywood of the 1950s to hilarious effect. MacKellan's *Out Of This World* is also the gayest show in town, in both the 1950 and 2008 senses of the word.

Out Of This World opens atop Mt. Olympus, where we meet Mercury, messenger to the gods (aka a "one-man heavenly Western Union") who introduces us to Jupiter's brood. They include statuesque Diana, goddess of the hunt, a bag of arrows on her back; Apollo, God of the Sun and Song, and the feyest/gayest of them all; Mars, god of war, a big burly hunk of man; tall handsome Bacchus, god of wine; Minerva, goddess of reason (a 4-eyed geeky gal); Night, goddess of celestial night, the only one garbed in black, not white; and Venus, goddess of love, a busty reincarnation of 1960s Liz Taylor.

Last to make his entrance is Jupiter, the All-Mighty, and Dad has an announcement to make. He's fallen in love with movie star Helen Vance! But, protest his progeny, movie stars are mortal! "Not in Hollywood," replies Dad, "where they're all gods and goddesses." When Jupiter asks Minerva to undertake the mission of bringing Helen back to Greece, she protests, "Father. I am the goddess of reason and enlightenment. Don't make me go to Hollywood!" Someone has to undertake the horny god's mission. After all, as his song "I Jupiter, I Rex" goes, he is "positively steaming with sex, brek-ek, co-ek, co-ek, Sex!" Apollo ends up the one who is assigned to undertake this mission.

Meanwhile, at the Formosa Café in Hollywood, glamorous Helen Vance keeps having the feeling of being watched (accompanied each time by the cascading notes of a harp).

Hollywood's premiere gossip columnist Isadora St. John soon arrives wearing a Hedda Hopper-sized hat. Helen hasn't had a hit since 1948's *Sorry, Bad Connection*, remarks Isadora, who learns that the superstar is taking some time off from Hollywood. Even sagging, her career is getting in the way of her romantic life. Still, when "Mark Simpson" (Apollo in disguise) offers her a role in the film version of his aunt's romantic best seller *Athens Adventure*, what can a movie star do but accept?

This being 1950s Hollywood, the studio contract's moral clause won't let Helen travel to Greece with her screenwriter fiancé Art O'Malley until she and Art tie the knot. They do this in short order, and Isadora, always in search of a story decides to follow them Athens.

Back on Olympus, Jupiter's petite and perky wife Juno learns that her off- cheating hubby is off chasing a mortal and determines that he will not catch her, not if she can help it.

Completing the mix is Chloe, a penniless American girl in Athens for the summer, looking for romance (with a rich man if at all possible).

The Cole Porter songs in *Out Of This World* are likely to be unfamiliar to even the most avid musical theater fans. In fact, the most famous song in *Out Of This World* wasn't even in the original Broadway production. "From This Moment On" was cut before the show opened, then used a year later in the movie version of *Kiss Me Kate*. It's back in the revised *Out Of This World*, joining such undiscovered Porter gems as the gorgeous "Use Your Imagination" and "I Am Loved."

The best songs in the show, though, are those which show off Porter's brilliance as a lyricist and master of rhymes as verse follows clever verse. In Juno's "I Sleep Easier Now," Jupiter's wife sings: "When I was snappier, I made all my boyfriends happier. When I was prettier, in bed I did not read Whittier. When I was hopin', I left all the doors wide open." Later, in her 11th hour show-stopper "Nobody's Chasing Me," Juno sings: "The cat is taking a licking, but nobody's licking me. The gander's chasing the goosey, but nobody's goosing me."

Not having seen the original, I can only imagine what kind of book it had. MacKellan's new one delights in 1950s movie references and gays up the plot to the delight of theater queens everywhere. Rarely has a gayer figure flitted across a musical theater stage than Apollo, Helen's fiancé Art ends up getting seduced by both Venus and Apollo, and lesbian Isadora finds herself smitten with Juno.

MacKellan's dialog is filled with clever exchanges like the following:

Diana: Male superiority is a myth.

Juno: So are you dear.

Isadora: I have a column.

Juno: Is it Doric or Corinthian?

Isadora: It's syndicated worldwide.

Jupiter: I will make you as everlasting as a star.

Helen: But I am a star!

(After Art's threeway with Diana and Apollo):

"I haven't seen you in this condition since Rock Hudson threw you that surprise party."

Director/choreographer Todd Nielsen keeps the proceedings light and airy, and despite the mere 25 hours rehearsal allowed by Actors' Equity, he has staged several snappy dance sequences, most especially the Act 2 opener, "Climb Up The Mountain," which has most of the cast hoofing to the song's bouncy beats. The lovely and graceful Erika Whalen (Goddess of the Night) did additional choreography for her character's solo dances. And there's also the funniest chase scene since Li'l Abner's Sadie Hawkins Day Race.

Musical Theatre Guild's "concert staged reading" of *Out Of This World* puts New York's 1995 Encores concert to shame. Here, there is no mere standing in a row in front of mikes. Yes, MTG's performers have script in hand, but their reliance on book is scarcely noticeable, and these are truly staged readings, with pretty much the same blocking that a fully staged production would have, and (in the case of *Out Of This World*) numerous costume changes. Encores concert may have had more recognizable names in its cast, and the cast recording is a must-own ([click here to purchase](#)), but MTG's cast, many with Broadway credits, is second to none in talent.

The brightest star of all in this *Out Of This World* is the terrific Teri Bibb, absolutely enchanting as glamour-girl Helen Vance. It's been far too long since we've seen Bibb in a starring role, and with her soaring soprano and matching beauty and acting chops, this Broadway vet is a locally-based performer who makes one proud to live in L.A.

Richard Israel is an absolute charmer as Apollo, David Holmes an impressive Jupiter, and Sam Zeller a muscular delight as Mars (who finds himself being groomed for Hollywood stardom by Isadora.) The irresistible Kevin McMahon plays gayer than gay without an ounce of condescension, Eileen Barnett is in diva heaven as Isadora, and Marsha Kramer stops the show not once but three times with "I Got Beauty," "I Sleep Easier Now," and "Nobody's Chasing Me." (Her reprise of "Cherry Pies Ought To Be You" with Barnett is a hoot as well.) Jill Townsend is the perfect ingénue as Chloe, and as Art, Damon Kirsche once again proves himself the most classically handsome man in L.A. musical theater with talent to match. Erika Whalen is the show's best dancer, in the role of Night, and Melissa Fahn (who's played Galinda in *Wicked* at the Pantages) is the sexiest of them all as mini-dressed Venus. Quinn Van Antwerp (as Bacchus) and Kami Seymore (as Diana) stand out

not only for their stature but for their talent, and (as Minerva, or should that be Minerda) Jennifer Gordon gets laughs every time she says a line.

Monday's Alex Theater audience was treated to an excellent seven-piece orchestra led by musical director Ed Martel. With costumes by Shon LeBlanc and Valentino Costumes, no wonder they're so good! Even the bare Alex stage was made look fabulous, with wide white cloth streamers in the air of a Greek temple, and some creative and colorful lighting.

Those in attendance at Monday's lone performance at the Alex were treated to a grand night of music and laughter. There is only one more performance, this coming Sunday at the Scherr Forum at the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza at 3:00. Reservations may be made at <http://www.ticketmaster.com/venue/90235>.

--Steven Stanley
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