

Going Down Swingin' (NYMF)

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Wednesday Oct 3, 2007

If you look at the logo for **Going Down Swingin'**, you'll see the flames of hell. The musical uses Mozart's opera Don Giovanni as its inspiration: the story where the no-good, unrepentant womanizer title character is dragged into the flames of Hell at the end.

This is no opera, though there is a 1950s soap opera within the story (which takes place at a radio station where such things were broadcast before television took over). The play uses the Don Giovanni story in a salad bar kind of way: picking and choosing just the elements it wants to use and ignoring the rest. There's a womanizer all right, and like in the opera plot, in the first scene he gets pushy with the woman he wants for the moment and she resists; her father rushes to her aid and the cad strikes out at him. Likewise, entering soon are a woman he jilted and a sweet young thing who could easily fall under his spell, too, and he has a sort of right hand man, etc. Some similarities in character name equivalents are noted (Donna Anna=Annabelle; Donna Elvira=Vera) . And certainly some of the characters wish the womanizer would go to Hell.

Although **there's lots of entertainment in Going Down Swingin'** and I laughed quite a bit, there are problems. The central character, by definition of the opera it's adapted from, has to be a heartless, selfish cad who treats women like property. How to handle that? Make him a buffoon? Make him a loveable cad (as in Pal Joey)? Give him a heart of gold? Create some sympathy for him by showing the pain he's masking with this behavior? Make him truly frightening so you're simply hoping the others will escape him? Make him irresistibly charming and magnetic so he casts a spell despite being a first class jerk? A spoonful of each of a few of these is tried, but with limited success. Mostly we're left with a very unpleasant character who is literally the necessarily evil. Otherwise, the play is just a sweet, funny spoof of different kinds of old radio shows - which for stretches is plenty good enough as entertainment. There's charm in that, especially when so well done by **this strong, skillful, smart cast.**

Between the fights and conniving and attempted seductions and the bad blood, basically we're watching a series of radio shows rehearsed, broadcast live, or discussed. That's the part this plays gets so right. There are the stock characters (hero, adventurer, long-suffering and noble lady, perky teenagers), and the more real people who play them. The tension comes in mega doses when they have to perform with this conceited oaf who holds the cards because he's the star. He sneers at but wants to bed the women (he's had two of the three in the past) and is eager to smear the reputation of a

male performer because he's linked with Annabelle and is competition as an up and coming rock and roll singer. It's 1956 and this new-fangled rock and roll is winning music fans over the finger-snapping swing practiced by star Dean (our Don Giovanni stand-in). His charisma is best shown in a song at the top of Act Two of this longish musical. If that were near the beginning of the first act, he might won some points.

The choice was made here to use all the songs as part of the entertainment on the radio and some commercials for it. There are no plot songs, no character songs per se. Some numbers are good pastiche of period styles (catchy early rock, fun up-tempo swingers, spot-on jingles overpraising products) but the exclusive use of songs this way does little to expand the characters (though a couple try too late). Some need more focus and a sharpening of the lyrics to make them do more than evoke a generalized style and to be memorable instead. Little theme songs for a couple of the radio shows, like Our Boy Harry, could incorporate the knowingness displayed in the radio dialogue.

Despite a good deal of music, it feels more like a play with songs than a standard musical. If the songs commented more directly on the story and characters, it would help: occasionally, they do thus seem to kill two birds with one stone. The stone in this case is Annabelle Stone, played by Meredith Patterson who can indeed sing like a bird. She gets to be torchy and tough, though it's a shame the musical doesn't use a fuller range of her talents. She's forced by the story to pout and grouch and simmer her way through much of the affair when in fact this singer-dancer-actress has a much broader range with sunny aspects and creamy voice colorings not called upon here. She gets to do the femme fatale bit in the detective mysteries, the kind the radio script can described as having a figure like an hourglass but that's filled not with sand but "filled with temptation."

The writing here shows that writer Matt Boresi knows his radio history and language. And director Jenny Lord gets everyone on the same page as the actors are reading from pages tossing off these lines with a wink but great fondness.

Marla Schaffel as Vera gets more chance to have fun. She enters for his first assignment, unhappily reunited professionally with you-know-who, greeting him with a wide smile of gritted teeth, "Hello, Dean, you lousy rat bastard." She describes how she'd love to remove his heart and stomp on it with the heel of her show. (She's not reticent!) Her **facial reactions are priceless** as she reacts to the soap opera lines she's saddled with, all the while gamely reading the melodramatic mush. "But he must never know!" she cries repeatedly, being the nurse in love with a doctor who has mangled hands from an accident and she must re-do the surgeries she can't bear to tell him he's botched. He reactions to the the announcer's intoning of her soap opera's storyline, "Can a woman over 30 ever find love?" referring to her as "a woman in middle life" and one "whose salad days have long since wilted."

The announcer/sound effects man is played with fluid ease by Hardy Rawls, but we never find out much about him. Still, of course, it's great fun to watch him make the matching sound effects with ordinary objects for gun shots, door slams, an avalanche. etc. Racial prejudice comes into play with the Amos and Andy/ Uncle Tom stylings forced upon the black sidekick character ably portrayed by James Stovall. Coldly he's told that he'll never be fully accepted on TV by white audiences or sponsors because of his race. The actor gets to really show his stuff in a solo in the second act.

As our Don Giovanni type, the fading radio star who hasn't made the switch to the quickly overtaking medium of television, we have Christopher Shyer. He plays the role forcefully and with a snickering smugness and a glare. He gets a meaty scene near the very end that is a tour de force of rage and desperation and bravado. But if the goal was to have us be anything but repelled by his character, it didn't happen for me. The dashing and focused Leo Ash Evens loosens up as the rock and roller and then tenses up appropriately walking into the landmine that is the live radio show overseen by someone who has it in for him. Interestingly, another level of tension is added via his character, the rock and roller new man in Annabelle's life. It's hinted by accusation that he may be gay and ripe for exposure. And that's just up Dean's alley as he constantly dangles the threat of saying too much on air. The suspicions linger in the air in the room. George McDaniel is briefly but effectively seen as Annabelle's father who is also the star of the thrills-and-chills radio segment, complete with cape.

Thoroughly delightful are Tom Deckman as the frustrated actor who's been portraying a wide-eyed teen in a serial for a dozen years (with his automatic pilot catchphrase, "Jumpin' Jupiter!") and Stacie Bono as the super-enthused newcomer. Their looks and body language are just right: he willing but bored and unchallenged, and knowing he can't look the part of a teenager on TV, so his days are numbered. She is just the essence of bright-eyed and busy-tailed (pony-tailed actually), bursting and squealing with joy at being among these established radio players.

The scripts for the radio plays and the commercials for cigarette sponsor promoting its refreshing effects are **period-perfect**, just exaggerated enough to not go ridiculously over the top with parody too often. **Played to a tee** are the one-dimensional idealized characters in the dramas (oh, so heroic, deadly serious, devoted, wholesome). When the actors playing the actors playing the characters are in character vocally but out of character physically, it makes it all the more wonderful. Keeping the voice tone right, they can be giving each other or the script dirty looks, be distracted by other actions, or looking over their shoulders for trouble. Some of those radio play segments go on longer than they need to and they feel repetitive.

On the other hand, they're welcome relief from what is oddly more melodramatic: the supposedly real events behind the scenes. It shouldn't feel

that way. Of course, the back-and-forth has been taken on before in other show biz stories, but the radio-play-within-the-play is ultimately more satisfying, with its nostalgia so well evoked and parodied at the same time. Like the TV series Remember WENN about the regulars at radio station, it has a sweetness and combines the little dramas with the real lives of the staff. Always good for a laugh (and it gets it each time) are the many ways the sponsor's products virtues are worked into the scenes and patter.

The onstage band being the radio station band, they could be incorporated into the action more and maybe have lines. Why not? I like the touch where one is reading a vintage Life magazine during a break and that they change costumes to wear matching ties for the big broadcast. Besides, it's an especially good-looking bunch of young musicians and they play wonderfully and do some in-character reacting: they are drummer Mike Reilly, bass player Alex Salwach, guitarist Michael Day, Aurora Nealand on clarinet/sax/flute and the show's composer, Peter Hilliard, on keyboards.

To use radio terms, some things made me tune out, sometimes we have to invoke the word static, but also being transmitted: talent and cleverness.