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THEATER REVIEW: Inventive choreography makes Reagle's 'Carousel' a riveting show

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Kyra Christopher, center, and the children's ensemble. Courtesy Photo/Herb Philpott

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Kyra Christopher, center, and the children's ensemble. Courtesy Photo/Herb Philpott



By Keith Powers/Daily News Correspondent

Posted Jun. 14, 2016 at 10:00 AM

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WALTHAM - Casual theatergoers think of musicals as whitewashed life, with any rough spots carefully scrubbed away so audiences can enjoy a couple hours of energetic singing and dancing.

Then there's "Carousel." When a carnival barker (sketchy right from the start) woos a simple millworker, they both get fired for the infatuation. And they're homeless. At this point we're only one hit song into Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1945 musical, which is getting a lively staging now at the Reagle Music Theatre in Waltham.

The story gets darker. Our barker, Billy Bigelow (a manly portrayal from Ciaran Sheehan) can't find work anywhere. His now-wife Julie (terrifically sung and acted by Jennifer Ellis), is pregnant. He decides a robbery is the only way to support them, but he's such a lame criminal that he gambles away his take even before the heist, then kills himself in the failed attempt.

Whitewashed life? Certainly not at this point. But thanks to some heavenly intervention, Billy finds a way to bring redemption to the mess of a life he's left behind, and "Carousel" ends on an optimistic note with "You'll Never Walk Alone."

Director Rachel Bertone has made the most of the noire edge to "Carousel," infusing the palooka tough guys and their wronged dames with a certain modern sensibility, mainly through smart choreography. Some of the original Agnes de Mille moves are intact, but it's mostly Bertone's insightful dance ideas that make this a show

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worth seeing, rather than a memory to revisit.

The singing is uniformly professional, with Sheehan the greater of equals in that department. A tenor with lowish range, he made the most of his solo moments - shining even in "If I Loved You," a composition that intentionally pushes the singer's limits to its upper breaking point. His acting stood out as well - at times combative, at times hesitant, always in character, whether addressing his sweetheart or the celestial judges.

Ellis provided his perfect counterpart, as the take-no-guff-from-her-guy Julie Jordan. Strong characterization is a must in order to make her scenario believable: she gives up everything for Billy - home, job, reputation - the very instant she meets him. Ellis, a gentle soprano, sang easily and affectingly as well - her highlights peaked at "What's the Use of Wond'rin."

Jessica Kundla (Carrie) and Dan Prior (Enoch) sang and acted ably as the lead couple's strait-laced foils, and secondary and comic roles were well cast with Karen Fanale (Mrs. Mullin), Leigh Barrett (Nettie) and Todd Yard (Jigger). Their singing was well supported by the small orchestra, led by conductor Jeffrey Leonard and sounding more robust in the pit than their numbers would suggest.

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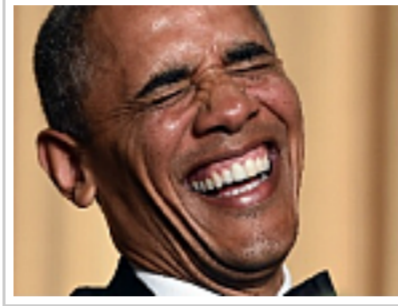
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