

Theater Review: Political lampoon an antidote for these times

Friday Posted Oct 14, 2016 at 10:26 PM

Updated Oct 14, 2016 at 10:26 PM

Head Trick Theatre's revival of 1937 musical "The Cradle Will Rock" sings out its truths without a hint of being dated.

By Keith PowersSpecial to The Journal

PROVIDENCE, R.I. -- Politics doesn't need to be current to be easily lampooned.

Take Marc Blitzstein's darkly comic musical, 1937's "The Cradle Will Rock." The mock-serious tale of a small-town strong man out to bust a union, Blitzstein's libretto and music take down demons that have mostly vanished from the American landscape.

Of course, thuggery in the name of preserving wealth and power never strays far from the headlines. Head Trick Theatre's production, on view now at AS220's Black Box, cleverly blocked and choreographed by director Rebecca Maxwell, sings out its truths without a hint of being dated.

The music and lyrics — all in rhyme, sung in arias, duets, as sprechstimme and in ensemble — make this both a period piece and tour de force. Sure, modern taste has diminished for the wild pastiche that Blitzstein created — show tunes, crazy quotes from Beethoven and Bach, folk melodies. But a spot-on parody always finds an audience.

The play wears its radical (for its day) colors proudly; the work itself, a WPA-sponsored production, was banned just before its premiere. Blitzstein moved the whole shebang — audience, performers, himself at keyboard — up Broadway to another theater, staged the play clandestinely, and its reputation was secure.

This production carries on that tradition. Music direction, by the agile keyboardist Noah Fields, takes first bow. Keeping up with the through-composed score, accompanying singers as if he were an art-song partner, Fields kept the train running.

The players come next. There were some solid voices, and some less so, but that's not the point. The story centers around the hoodwinked citizens of Steeltown, coerced throughout their blue-collar lives by Mr. Mister (Robert Grady), mostly singing palooka-style about their conflicts. Street voices welcome, thank you.

The dozen or more actors all ran through multiple roles, easing their way in and around the audience for "solidarity." The set was so spontaneously spare it was almost nonexistent — café tables, some chairs.

Balances suffered somewhat, but that was Blitzstein's fault, not the troupe's. A couple chaotic scenes had characters singing a duet, a chorus supplying a cautionary tale behind, another soloist adding a counterpoint argument, and the keyboardist trying to support it all. Hardly any of that worked.

But crisp attention to roles, and sharp delivery of lines from this versatile cast, made it fun to be around. Union-busting may be a thing of the past, but "The Cradle Will Rock" certainly isn't.

Head Trick Theatre's "The Cradle Will Rock" runs Oct. 14 through 23 at AS220's Black Box, 95 Empire St., Providence. Tickets are \$15, free with Brown/RISD ID. Call (401) 831-9327 or visit <http://as220.org/?s=The+Cradle+Will+Rock>

Keith Powers is a veteran New England theater reviewer. On Twitter: [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith).

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