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## Bway Critics Send Valentines to Madison County



More than 50 million people have bought copies of Robert James Waller's 1992 novel, "The Bridges of Madison County." How many people will come to see a musical version of the material? Broadway is about to find out with the arrival of composer Jason Robert Brown and librettist Marsha Norman's Broadway musical of the same name.

Two-time Tony winner Kelli O'Hara plays Francesca, a bored housewife married to Hunter Foster (a "Little Shop of Horrors" Tony nominee) but pining for a visiting nature photographer (Steven Pasquale). Staged by Bartlett Sher, "The Bridges of Madison County" began previews Jan. 17 and opened last night, Feb. 20, at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theater.

So did Broadway's critics cross the Bridge when they came to it or did they burn this "Bridges" behind them?

For his part, TheaterMania's David Gordon decks the "Bridges" with garlands. Calling the tuner "terrific" and the song "Another Life" "extraordinarily beautiful," Gordon raves that Jason Robert Brown's score provides O'Hara and Pasquale "with an embarrassment of riches, and Tony winner Brown manages to top himself with each successive song." And talk about a "wow" closer for a review: "One can only imagine," writes Gordon, "that the feeling onlookers have as Francesca and Robert fall in love is akin to that of 1945 audiences when Billy Bigelow and Julie Jordan first sat on a bench and changed the face of musical theater."

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Variety's Marilyn Stasio gripes that "although Kelli O'Hara and Steven Pasquale are in glorious voice as this passionate pair, the bombastic orchestrations and Bartlett Sher's overstated helming inflate the production into some quasi-operatic beast that thinks it's 'Aida.'" Ouch. Stasio loves O'Hara's soprano but hates her "atrocious" Iowa accent and feels she's miscast. Like Gordon, Stasio loves the song, "Another Life."

Entertainment Weekly's Thom Geier praises a different song, "One Second & a Million Miles," which he says is "destined to become a cabaret staple." Geier likes much of JRB's "lush and deeply romantic score" but grumbles that "the story has no real villains, or even antagonists, to work up a plot worth sustaining for 2 hours and 45 minutes." Still, he grants "Bridges" an overall B+ and lauds director Sher for helping "a chamber musical...fill the space in the Gerald Schoenfeld Theater."

Writing for the Chicago Tribune, Chris Jones also has issues with the "overly earnest" tone of the show. "Despite some beautiful music...and exquisite singing from Kelli O'Hara and Steven Pasquale," Jones writes, "Marsha Norman's book...misses the movie's smoldering passions," especially because the two leads are playing the sad ending "right from the start." That said, Jones finds the final scenes "very rushed" and Foster's character "underwritten."

New York Times chief critic Ben Brantley basically writes a love letter to Kelli O'Hara, who "confirms her position as one of the most exquisitely expressive stars in musical theater." Alas, "most of what surrounds her has the depth of a shiny picture postcard, one that bears a disproportionately long and repetitive message." Brantley also admits that he wasn't exactly a fan of Waller's novel: "though it's short, and I have I fairly high tolerance for romantic swill, I had to stop halfway through." He does praise Jason Robert Brown's music, which offers "plenty of rich fare to feast on."

The Associated Press' Mark Kennedy agrees, lauding Brown's "superb, thrilling score." He continues, "A sometimes bloated and meandering book by Marsha Norman and some odd choices by director Bartlett Sher can't take anything away from a score that brilliantly goes from torch song to blues and honky-tonk to virtual opera, led by two actors with genuine feeling and a seemingly endless reservoir of notes."

In his 4 (out of 5) star review for the Daily News, Joe Dziemianowicz is kinder to Norman's book, though he, like several other critics, finds her more at home in the central love story than "the family and neighbor subplots." No such reservations for the tunes, though: "The beating heart of the show is Brown's score. It's richly melodic and rhythmic — and one of Broadway's best in the last decade. Brown's stirring orchestrations — strings, piano and percussion — provide perfect settings for his musical gems." Dziemianowicz also praises O'Hara's "rare and radiant grace" and Pasquale's "rugged good looks...and virile vocals."



In her 3 (out of 4) star review for the New York Post, Elisabeth Vincentelli finds the show more of a "mixed bag, one in which cringe-inducing bits alternate with moments of musical-theater nirvana." She continues, "[O'Hara's singing] is a dream and is unexpectedly funny... If there is an affair to remember here, it's the enduring one between O'Hara and the audience." And just to prove that everyone has different taste, Vincentelli disses "Another Life" as "not so much like a Joni Mitchell B-side."

In his 2 (out of 4) star review for AM New York, ever the outlier, Matt Windman calls the "slow, static and quiet" show "a snooze and a misfire." Bartlett Sher's "self-conscious" directing doesn't help, nor does Norman opening the story up to include a lot of distracting family and neighbors. Like other critics, Windman questions Michael Yeargan's "skeletal" set, which lacks the rustic richness of the film version of the material. Windman concludes, "At least [O'Hara] and her co-star Steven Pasquale show off their exquisite singing voices," though "Hunter Foster, as Francesca's rundown husband, gets lost in the background."

Alexis Soloski, writing for The Guardian, is kinder in her \*\*\* (out of 5) review, noting that O'Hara is as sumptuously voiced as ever and dazzles in the biographical number, 'Almost Real,' while Pascal "is implausibly hunky and an able, emotive singer himself." Soloski has issues with some of the show's "maudlin gestures," but "the tear-streaked audience leapt to their feet. They loved it anyway."

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David is an award-winning playwright whose solo, The Miracle of Long Johns, won Best Non-Fiction Script in the 2015 United Solo Theater Festival and will be touring to NYC for four performances at 777 Theater, April 7-8, 2016. The former editor of Playbill.com, David is a member of the Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle and has written for Backstage, Show Business, Entertainment Weekly and Long Island Pulse. He is co-publisher of Performing Arts Insider theater journal and is the founder of TotalTheater.com, where you can find information about his weekly radio show, Dave's Gone By.

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