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Fade Out - Fade In

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Bill Coyne and Vanessa Lemonides in a scene from *Fade Out-Fade In*
(Photo credit: Michael Portantiere)

In 1964, Carol Burnett who had become a star with her first Broadway show *Once Upon a Mattress* five years earlier was lured back to Broadway with a new musical built around her considerable comedic talents. *Fade Out - Fade In*, created by composer Jule Styne and librettists Betty Comden and Adolph Green, received good reviews but became a troubled show when Burnett suffered neck injuries in a taxi accident. The show closed for three months while Burnett recovered but only lasted two months when it reopened. As a result, *Fade Out - Fade In* has become one of those forgotten shows that has fallen by the wayside even with its impressive credits.

As part of Musicals Tonight!'s fifteenth season, *Fade Out - Fade In* is once more available for a viewing in a concert version with an especially large cast and a great many costume changes for its heroine Hope Springfield. It proves to be a very thin show, a kind of watered-down version of

Comden and Green's classic film musical of the silent film era, *Singin' in the Rain*, with a great many of the same plot elements. This parody of the Hollywood film community and particularly one of its moguls, MGM's Louis B. Mayer, is overly familiar and not very profound, substituting tired old gags for real wit and humor. A real disappointment from the usually reliable Comden and Green.

Of course, the show was a star vehicle intended to show off the special qualities of its inimitable comedienne - found to be irreplaceable when she began missing performances. Without Burnett - or a comedienne of her skills - the show doesn't have much reason for existing. Her role was given all the best songs ("Call Me Savage," "Usher from the Mezzanine," "Lila Tremaine"), but it also covered the entire range of her special talents, business that can't be written down in the script. Asking another actress to step into her shoes who is not a world class comedienne is almost cruel and unusual punishment. Vanessa Lemonides gamely attempts to cavort as Burnett must have done but she doesn't have the inventive gifts that would have lifted this revival into something more than a competent but uninspired showcase.



Oakley Boycott and Rob Lorey in a scene from Musicals Tonight!'s revival of *Fade Out - Fade In* (Photo credit: Michael Portantiere)

The story concerns New York usherettes, comical Hope Springfield and blonde bombshell Gloria Currie, who have been seen by FFF Studios' mogul L.Z. Governor at a movie premiere. L.Z. picks "Number 5" (meaning to say "Number 4") from the line up of the usherettes to be his next star and leaves for a trip to Vienna to consult with famed psychiatrist Dr. Traurig. Nephew Rudolph Governor, the heir apparent left in charge of the studio, brings Hope out to star in *The Fiddler and the Fighter* opposite the studio's top leading man Byron Prang, although Rudolph's brother Ralph, V.P. in charge of Approval, insists that Hope is not L.Z.'s type.

When L.Z. returns and sees Rudolph's finished picture with Hope and Byron, he fires Hope, orders that the print be burned and brings in Gloria to remake it from scratch. However, Ralph has fallen in love with Hope and plots to save both her picture and her career. He believes that she has the stuff to be a great movie star and in typical Hollywood fashion all ends happily.

Director Thomas Sabella-Mills keeps the plot moving merrily along but he doesn't get much mileage out of the lame jokes which probably needed to be more broadly acted in order to get any zing out of them. The casting is competent but as the show is so weak it needs more exaggerated performances to put it over. In the leading role, Lemonides is fine and does well with her big song numbers but she is not ideal casting for the role of Carol Burnett which requires not only acting ability but dazzling comic inventiveness. As her champion Rudolph Governor, Rob Lorey has an excellent voice but is too bland a leading man to make much impression. Better is Bill Coyne as the conceited and self-absorbed film star Byron Prang but he needs to be more arrogant and vain to make this part droll.

Stealing the show, however, are Joan Barber and Oakley Boycott. Barber is hilarious doubling as both silent film star Myra Melrose now relegated to the wardrobe room and Dora Dailey, a parody of Hedda Hopper as Hollywood's mean-minded radio gossip columnist. Ms. Boycott nails the screechy-voiced blonde starlet Gloria Currie, making her reminiscent of Comden and Green's Lina Lamont, created by Jean Hagen in the now classic *Singin' in the Rain*. Like Barber, she makes her material seem much better than it is. In the "You Mustn't Be Discouraged" number, Terrence Clowe does a first-rate tap dance in the Bill "Bojangles" Robinson parody opposite Lenonides whose Shirley Temple impersonation needs a bit more brushing up, possibly with more ringlets and curls. As the Viennese psychiatrist trying to solve L.Z.'s deep-seated problems, Robin Haynes is only mildly amusing as the doctor who finds all problems to have their roots in sex.

Not every show by the Broadway greats is up to their usual standards. One might expect a musical created by Comden and Green, Jule Styne and originally directed by legendary showman George Abbott to be a masterpiece but such is not the case. With David R. Bishop giving a proficient account of the score at the piano as musical director, Musicals Tonight!'s concert version with book-in-hand

is strictly professional without giving any idea of what this show must have been with Carol Burnett at the helm. If you are Comden & Green or Jule Styne buffs you may want to see this show - for who knows when you will get another chance to see it on stage.

Fade Out – Fade In (through October 28)

Musicals Tonight! at The Lion Theatre on Theatre Row, 410 W. 42nd Street, in Manhattan
For tickets, call 212-239-6200 or <http://www.Telecharge.com>