

OFFOFFONLINE REVIEW

[The Wild Party](#) reviewed February 8, 2008

by Amy Krivohlavek

Creativity struck twice during the 2000 theater season, when two dramatic adaptations of the Jazz-Age poem “The Wild Party” surfaced in New York. On Broadway, composer Michael John LaChiusa’s version nabbed a handful of Tony nominations but closed after only 68 performances; Off Broadway, Andrew Lippa’s incarnation met with a similar fate, snagging several awards but playing only 54 performances. Were audiences resistant to this edgy source material, or were they simply confused by having two parties to choose between?

Whatever the reason, the lights went out on both shows in 2000, but now, eight years on, Brooklyn’s ever-reliable and always ambitious Gallery Players have revived Andrew Lippa’s slick and seductive send-up of *The Wild Party*; with no competing garish galas in the area (aside from the occasional Park Slope street festival), perhaps audiences won’t shy away from the deliciously decadent production this time around.

The titular party is born, as so many problematic ideas are, out of nagging boredom. Queenie, the blonde and leggy half of a vaudeville couple living in 1920s Manhattan, persuades her boyfriend Burrs—a stage clown with a volatile, violent temper—to throw a spontaneous and gargantuan bash. Their relationship has soured, and she’s hungry for an influx of new and familiar faces to stir up some drama.

When her old pal Kate arrives with her latest catch, Mr. Black, in tow, Queenie immediately goes on the hunt. Shrugging Burrs off on Kate, she falls into a fierce flirtation with Black, who is an all too willing partner in this toxic mix of jealousy, love, and desperation.

Lippa’s almost completely sung-through score carefully traces the paths of the central characters, who perform the bulk of the material. A writhing mass of decadence, the party is laced with acts of debauchery (alcohol and drug use, sexual couplings), but it is also peopled with an extraordinary collage of juicy supporting characters. And in this production, the featured players nearly pull the rug out from beneath the principals.

Not that the leading characters don’t have some exceptional talent. As the calculating Queenie, Nicole Sterling has a distinctive voice and puts forth an instantly provocative presence and an imposing silhouette, but her tough-as-nails demeanor never registers the vulnerability that makes Queenie such a tragically trapped figure. In contrast, Jonathan Hack’s performance only skims the madness that would transform Burrs into a truly menacing, maniacal, and just plain terrifying persona. He has an explosive voice that handles this demanding material well, but it’s hard to believe that his Burrs wouldn’t be crushed by Queenie in two seconds flat.

The other leads fare better. Michael Jones turns in a smooth and enigmatic performance as the elusive Mr. Black, and Julia Cardia brings a delightfully zany energy to her thrilling performance as the devious Kate. In fact, her appearance midway through Act One was enough to kick the entire production into a higher gear—she explodes onto the stage like an uncorked bottle of champagne.

The most frustrating part of this *Wild Party*, however, is the tantalizing tease of being introduced to entrancing supporting characters who, after saying hello, don’t say much ever again. As the sexually ravenous Madelaine True, Tauren Hagens stops the show with an avalanche of perfectly fired one-liners

during her saucy solo “An Old-Fashioned Love Story” (just guess which kind). As the dim boxer Eddie and his pint-sized girlfriend Mae, Theis Wekessser and K.C. Leiber turn in a sweetly comic—and adorably choreographed—duet on “Two of a Kind,” while composer brothers Phil and Oscar D’Armano (portrayed by cunning comedians Justin Birdsong and Zak Edwards) generate peppy panache as they guide the partygoers through a performance of their latest project.

Although these characters get a bit lost in the shuffle, this is still a hypnotic and intoxicating party in which to lose yourself. Director Neal J. Freeman keeps his ensemble on their toes—they are both interested *and* interesting—throughout the production, and Brian Swasey has created some exceptional, infectious choreography that uses the claustrophobic confines of the on-stage apartment to great advantage. And although the brassy band frequently threatens to overpower the actors (and, more perniciously, to obscure the show’s lyrics), they keep the show jumping under the solid direction of Jeffrey Campos.

The production also provides sumptuous visuals through the evocative and provocative designs of Summer Lee Jack (costumes), Hannah Shafran (set), and John Eckert (lighting).

Although the original *Wild Party* is now a distant echo, the best parties never lose their steam. Composer Andrew Lippa sat across the aisle from me during the production I attended, and judging from his reactions to the show, both he—and the responsive audience—are happy to have this *Wild Party* back in the city.