

[Greenwich Village Follies](#) Written by Rob Lester for the CABARET EXCHANGE 2009



For a good time, call...the box office or whoever is selling tickets to a show that mixes happiness and history and hilarity. It's currently running just on Sundays, but it should be running for many a month of Sundays. In fact, I think *The Greenwich Village Follies* is a clever endeavor that should run forever and ever ---- or at least as long as our current mayor wants to keep running for office and running the city. Songs are introduced with usually concise and sometimes snippy snippets of history. The cast seems eager to impart them. If I'd ever had a history professor with this much love for the subject, I might have become a history writer (or at least stayed awake in history class cracked a book or smile).

The zeal the cast and songs exhibit is hard to resist. "Resist the Grid!" pleads one of the dozen-and-a-half original songs, showing the spunk and nonconformity of Villagers wanting to keep its non-traditional street configurations (which go back to the days when they were farms, etc.). The streets, avenues, places, alleys and mews of Greenwich Village can be winding and angled (somewhere 4th Street slams up against 10th Street), but going to good, solid entertainment and the funnybone, *The Greenwich Village Follies* takes a direct, straight path. Well, not always "straight" in one sense, but that's another story. (One of the revolving series of guest artists, Sharon Fogarty, offered a cheeky but affectionate song about the Village being oh-so gay. The Stonewall riots, forty years ago this month, come alive and into perspective. And the sassy, talented, eager-to-please (and be pleased?) John-Andrew Morrison flirts shamelessly with guys in the audience as he quizzes them on their knowledge about the fabled neighborhood and tosses out *bon mots* and tosses out condoms into the good-vibes-filled air as prizes. Of course, they have the show's name and logo brightly emblazoned on the wrapper. Later, he unwraps his serious side and can be very effective and stir the emotions. Patti Goettlicher seems at first to be stuck in the limiting repetition of the dumb (but cheery) blonde characterizations, but soon branches out to show more versatility.

Silver himself provides musical accompaniment on keyboards. The piece's savvy director, Andrew Frank, wrote the book and co-wrote the lyrics (which is both a revival and an homage to the original small-scale *Follies* of many decades ago) with composer/co-lyricist Doug Silver. Together, they have fashioned a series of songs and bits that rarely lag or want for more (or less). Brisk, bright and brash, it makes a point, and then turns the page of its living-loving history book. Many of the songs - and the performances of them - provide the only real disappointment: there is no cast album available in the lobby; otherwise, I think there'd be a line. We'll just have to spend that money at a nearby Village restaurant having a post-theatre snack and discussing how much we enjoyed this nifty night.

We quickly accept the small-scale, small stage, big heart feel and informality. Actors as hosts are chatty and "just folks" from the get-go. They disappear behind a screen to change --- sometimes changing and chatting at the same time --- and with the musical accompaniment and first row a stone's throw away (if you throw like a girl), it all has the

feel of a neighborhood mom-and-pop store, except that they are selling talent and factoids instead of coffee and gum.

It's not quite all frivolity or a whitewash of history. The tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire is addressed in a wrenching song that makes us feel like the witnesses. But it's done with dignity and respect rather than being a manipulative tearjerker. It's acknowledged and then they move on: back to the intentionally tacky, cheap wigs and moustaches and props. It's the only thing in Greenwich Village that is "low rent." A woman brimming with energy and talent named Charlie Parker becomes painter Jackson Pollock's actual canvas (yes, the costume is a canvas with her smile-shining face revealed). She sings blithely and brazenly, "Splatter Me All Over." But she herself has many colors in her palette: with plenty of voice and game for anything, she is a joy as she *spreads* joy and takes on different character types as easily as donning and doffing the myriad costume pieces.

There's a playfulness, a sort of "they put me up to this" look when a character dons a costume or hat or throws out a groan-worthy line. For example, Rolfe Winkler has a "get me out of this/no, don't, I love it" lopsided grin as he becomes peg-legged Peter Stuyvesant, a drug dealer, or any number of concerned or unconcerned citizens. Without being as in-your-face and boisterous as others at times, he's quite marvelous and wonderfully watchable.

The mostly jolly *Follies* – like a walk through the actual neighborhood it addresses and is smack in the middle of – can provoke and pose and posit and challenge and be frank about sexuality and cause one to gawk or grin. A few moments are not for kids or your easily-blushing/offended Great Aunt Hortense. Like the New York neighborhood whose history and unique character it embraces with a big wet kiss, it has charm up the wazoo. The cast is endearing and bubbly and winking --- ready, willing, and more than able to entertain and inform. It makes you long for the days when snappy, scrappy, slap-happy revues full of spunk, stylishness and equal amounts piss and vinegar (of the best vintages) were common. But this is not just a nostalgic wallow in the past with an antique style. It feels fresh and fun and modern, as yesterday and today meet up on the corner of Christopher Street and Seventh (Heaven). If you like a little sass and cleverness and leaving the theatre with a well-crafted song in your heart and warm feeling in your belly, this show is right up your MacDougal Alley. If you know one of the answers to the trivia questions, you might leave with a little prize --- a refrigerator magnet with the show's logo. This musical potpourri is itself a magnet for fun and talent.

If you're a lifetime or longtime New Yorker who's feeling down or hassled and forgot why you fell in love with this crazy city in the first place, *The Greenwich Village Follies* will remind you. If you're a tourist, perhaps the musical revue should come with a warning sticker: it could make the Village seem so irresistible that you'll feel an overwhelming desire to move here and park yourself in Washington Square Park, near Manhattan Theatre Source, where the revelry brightens the city.

Manhattan Theatre Source is at 177 MacDougal Street, off West 8th Street in (of course) Greenwich Village. Tickets are \$35. The phone number is 212-501-4751. See www.thegreenwichvillagefollies.com Sundays at 7:00 PM.