

British Theatre Guide

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Fame

Conceived by David de Silva, Book by Jose Fernandez, Lyrics by Jacques Levy, Music by Steve Margoshes

Shaftesbury Theatre
(2007)

Fame is back in the West End, filling a four-month gap at the Shaftesbury Theatre before yet another American sensation, *Hairspray*, makes a belated London debut.

The two big names cast to draw in the crowds are Ian H Watkins and Natalie Casey. The former is better known as H from Steps. He was also a star on the most recent race-wars series of *Celebrity Big Brother* with Jade Goody and Shilpa Shetty and a London, Technicolor Joseph. Miss Casey made her name in *Hollyoaks* and then moved on to get a lot of laughs in *Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps*.

In fact, this is a far more of an ensemble show and without prior knowledge, the average visitor would not realise that this pair was more significant than many of their colleagues.

Fame started out as a movie before becoming a highly successful TV series and stage show. It now runs on reputation, although during a bland first half, only brightened by Lars Bethke's often sensational choreography, there is plenty of time to wonder where the appeal lies.

The plotting is negligible. The story follows a group of teenagers who enter Manhattan's New York High School for Performing Arts in the early 1980s. As Morgan Large's drab design makes clear, this was a dilapidated hulk in the theater district that looks more like a prison than an educational institution. By the end, it has been replaced by a sparkling new space at the Lincoln Center.

The group is an eclectic mix of would-be superstars and, over a four-year period, we watch them falling in and out of brief love affairs and even see some signs of artistic development.

In many ways, Karen Bruce's production and the play itself seemed embarrassed by the need to present a narrative thread, preferring boy gets girl, boy leaves girl, girl gets boy, girl leaves boy, to anything deeper, until the final scenes.

Then a little pathos is injected, as the teachers discover after three years of supposedly educating him that cool black dancer Tyrone, played by Desi Valentine is illiterate. By that stage too, Natalie Kennedy's Carmen Diaz (not Cameron Diaz - much to the disappointment of the man in the next seat) has dropped out, turned into a crack whore and died.

None of this is the reason why audiences have flocked to this show. Primarily, they may want to remember their youth and see the dancers offering everything from classical ballet to flamenco and even something not too far from Michael Jackson's Moonwalk.

Add to this at least a few tunes that are unforgettable, particularly the title song pounded out by Miss Kennedy and *Dancin' on the Sidewalk* and you have the makings of a saleable evening.

There are also some talented performers, with two sensational singers, Fem Belling cast as the comic fat Mabel and Jacqui Dubois as schoolmarm Miss Sherman respectively bringing the house down singing the blues and soul.

And what of our big names? Ian H Watkins, as the soap star who wants to be a real actor, is every bit the clean-cut boy band stereotype with a light voice that can get drowned out by his colleagues. Miss Casey, playing the girl who loves him, sings nicely enough and gets many of the best comic moments.

The politically aware might also question some of the motivations, with issues dumbed down to such an extent that, at times, the writers get close to espousing views that could be seen as anti-gay, racist, sexist and even weightist, were there such a word.

The formula obviously works though after so many successful years in the West End and this short run should be a hit. However, Fame is no *Evita* or *The Sound of Music* and without the dancers on top form would not have all that much to offer.

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Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)