

British Theatre Guide

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Parade

Book by Alfred Uhry, music and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown
Danielle Tarento, Joe Fredericks and Southwark Playhouse
Southwark Playhouse
(2011)

In a time BC (before children) I was an irredeemable Edinburgh Fringe addict and many an August since has been accompanied by something akin to withdrawal symptoms which can only be alleviated by seeing exceptional, thrilling or stimulating theatre.

How lucky am I then that hot on the heels of an excellent production of a favourite show, [The Hired Man](#) comes *Parade* at the Southwark Playhouse. This is meatier stuff, with a less hauntingly beautiful score than *The Hired Man*, but similarly strikingly well delivered by a cast, here led by Alastair Brookshaw and Laura PittPulford.

When I say a less hauntingly beautiful score it is more in commentary than in criticism of composer and lyricist Jason Robert Brown's output which includes a patriotic anthem, a hoedown, a gospel and a blues number all of which work well in context and show off his song writing skill. This score isn't simple stuff and benefits from rehearsing.

Perhaps though driven by book writer Alfred Uhry's tendency towards melodrama, the score leans towards pointing up the ardent, which in turn may explain why both director and musical director have little choice but to have the terrific Laura PittPulford sing at full emotional tilt almost without exception.

The action takes place some fifty years after the Confederate's defeat in the American Civil War which still rankles the inhabitants of Atlanta, Georgia.

The story is based on the real life events surrounding the indictment of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory supervisor, for the rape and murder of a 13 year old employee, white girl Mary Phagan. In response to a groundswell of public outrage at the crime, the powers that be recognise that a scapegoat must be found as "hangin' another nigger ain't enough this time", and they set out to frame Frank, a hardworking but fidgety and tense Yankee, an easy target and obvious outsider in the south where Jews are another easy-to-hate minority.

This is a show of two halves. The first act is a build up to and closes with the *dénouement* of the trial where Frank is found guilty and sentenced to hang, while the second act progresses through the development of the relationship between Frank and his wife, Lucille, as she helps him achieve a commuting of his sentence ultimately expecting a pardon; it is a mutual, loving understanding that ends in tragedy when Leo is lynched by a mob who storm the prison. It's an odd match with the struggle for justice unable to match the tension or emotional tug of the initial injustice that required it.

Further, the second act grapples to square the circle of a dramatic apex that is not an ending, and indeed where do you go after a stunningly staged lynching for an effective finish.

Thom Southerland who has done great things in small spaces ([State Fair](#) and *Carousel* spring to mind) makes the most of the bigger space here and the staging in traverse with balustraded balconies at each end works extremely well beneath the Playhouse's railway arches, with minimal tennis match effect (Menier Road Show team take note). He manages the dramatic peaks and mini peaks with care and it is not his fault that there are too many of them.

The same must be said for musical director Michael Bradley who equally does great things with a six piece band. Choreographer Tim Jackson, designer John Risebero and lighting and sound designers Howard Hudson and Theo Holloway all contribute to create a steamy hot, slimily corrupt atmosphere.

With Southerland's doubling and more of roles, there isn't a single performer who falls below a highset bar. Undoubtedly at the front is Laura Pitt-Pulford's beautifully sung Lucille Frank, and up there beside her is Alastair Brookshaw's nervy Leo.

Samuel J Weir's soldier and Frankie and Jessica Bastick-Vine's Mary share a youthful innocence and Philip Rham's war veteran is memorable as are Simon Bailey and Terry Doe's sonorous testosterone fuelled voices.

Apparently Network Rail need convincing that the Playhouse is worthy of a home in the redeveloped London Bridge Station space for the arts? Surely not when they can have another retail unit. They should go along and see this striking production before raining on the Playhouse's parade.

"Parade" runs until 17 September

Reviewer: [Sandra Giorgetti](#)