

LINER NOTES FOR “ELF”

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When I set off to see the new musical “Elf”, I confess that my expectations were fairly low because I had reservations about the film on which it was based. To my surprise and delight, the creative team that put “Elf” together had given all of us musical theater buffs a delectable, glistening Christmas gift. Thomas Meehan and Bob Martin, the bookwriters, aided by director Casey Nicholaw, had taken the best ideas from the film and added an abundance of entertaining and comic ideas of their own. And the composer and lyricist Matthew Sklar and Chad Beguelin, matched the bookwriters’ contribution with a set of unusually witty and joyous songs.

In a holiday show, we expect a majority of the musical numbers to be cheerful and rhythmic. The danger, of course, is that the score will suffer from a surfeit of incessant and repetitious exuberance. Not so here. Mr. Sklar has provided a splendidly tuneful score and sustained its exuberance with a wealth of rhythmic variety. Many a composer hopes that his songs will lift our spirits. These songs actually do.

As a lyricist myself, I was particularly impressed with the wit and craft of Chad Beguelin’s lyrics. It’s a pleasure to hear lyrics as intelligent and technically accomplished as these. I advise you to listen to these songs closely. Your reward will be the discovery of any number of slyly witty lines along with a profusion of fresh and charming rhymes. (And, hard as it is to believe in today’s theater, you won’t hear one obscenity.)

One of the tasks “Elf” accomplishes so admirably is to seduce the audience into accepting the premise that there *is* a Santa Claus. True, Santa is a character in the play and we go along with it. But when we hear the little boy, Michael, and his mother, Emily, sing “There Is A Santa Claus”, we blasé adults suddenly realize how very deeply we would like to believe that there really *is* a Santa Claus. Sklar and Beguelin (assisted by Doug Besterman’s exhilarating orchestration) do an extraordinary job of conveying in music and lyrics the astonishment, wonder and excitement Michael and Emily feel when they see Santa’s sleigh in the sky -- an astonishment, wonder and excitement that we share with delight.

In a family show such as “Elf”, there is always the risk of being either too juvenile (fine for the kiddies but not for their parents), too cute or too overly sentimental. Happily, the creators of “Elf” have avoided all of these traps.

The too juvenile trap: throughout the show, Messrs. Meehan, Martin, Beguelin and Sklar have chosen to write at a level that young audiences will understand and enjoy, but with book, lyrics and music that are sophisticated enough to entertain mature audiences. (Experience has taught me that this is no easy accomplishment.)

The too cute trap: I was both relieved and impressed by how nimbly the writers side-stepped this trap. For an example of how they did it, listen to the song entitled “Sparkle-jollytwinklejingley”. With that title, one thinks, “How can it *not* be twee?” Amazingly, it’s not. The lyrics are bright and colorful and the unusual metric scheme of the lyrics has led to a satisfyingly unpredictable melody: a lively, swinging number that will probably have you tapping your toes.

The too sentimental trap: By applying intelligence, care and imagination, the writers have managed to present the emotional problems of the play in a way that makes them recognizable and real. What a touching idea it was, in “I’ll Believe in You”, to have the neglected son, Michael, tell Santa what he *doesn’t* want for Christmas (the usual list of expensive gifts), when what he desperately *does* want is to spend time with his dad. Not only is the song genuinely touching but, as with every other song in the score, it’s laced with unexpected humor. And Mr. Sklar has done his part in quashing any inherent sentimentality by setting the lyrics, in part, as a lilting jazz waltz.

I’d like to end these notes by reiterating my comment that “Elf” is a delectable, glistening gift to anyone who enjoys musical theatre. For those of you who have yet to see “Elf”, I’m certain that it won’t be long before you have the opportunity. This is a show that is sure to turn up in a good many places every Christmas. But you needn’t wait until Christmas to enjoy the CD; as you’ll hear, “Elf” is a score for all seasons.

