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# Iron Curtain



This is a new musical

presented by Prospect Theater Company. Set in the 1950s, it follows the adventures of an unsuccessful composer/lyricist team as they are kidnapped by the KGB and taken to the USSR to ghost-write communist propaganda musicals, where they are forced to choose between the fame they yearn for and the freedom they have lost.

*Pictured: A scene from Iron Curtain (photo © Corinne Zadik)*

#### nytheatre.com review

Michael Criscuolo · April 14, 2006

Imagine if Bob Hope and Bing Crosby had made a movie in which they played songwriters who were kidnapped by the KGB and brought to Russia for a top-secret government plan. There would be some of Hope and Crosby's trademark witty repartee, a few songs to get the audience's feet tapping (and to take their minds off the plot for a few minutes), and Dorothy Lamour vamping it up as a sultry Soviet vixen. If you can imagine this all clearly enough, then you probably share the same zany sensibility as *Iron Curtain*, the new musical that harkens back to a different era. In addition to the Hope-Crosby vibe coursing through it, *Iron Curtain* invokes many classic Broadway

#### VENUE

[West End Theatre](#)

#### OPENED

April 8, 2006

#### CLOSED

April 30, 2006

#### PERFORMANCES

Thu - Sat at 8pm;  
Sun at 3pm  
also Apr 26 at 8pm

#### RUNNING TIME

2 hours, 40 minutes

#### TICKETS

\$18  
\$15 students/seniors  
212-352-3101

#### CAST

Bethe B. Austin, Larry Brustofski, Maria Couch, Amber Dow, Jeff Edgerton, Jessica Grove, David S. Miller, Marcus Neville, Dara Seitzman, Doug Shapiro, Robby Sharpe, Rich Silverstein, Gordon Stanley, Brad York

#### MUSIC

Stephen Weiner

#### LYRICS

Peter Mills

#### BOOK

Susan DiLallo

#### DIRECTOR

Cara Reichel

#### CHOREOGRAPHER

Christine O'Grady

#### SETS

Nick Francone

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musicals in both spirit and temperament. Not surprising, considering the presence of lyricist Peter Mills and director Cara Reichel, the artistic team behind one of last season's finest productions, *The Pursuit of Persephone*. As they demonstrated there, Mills and Reichel are old-school Broadway show folk at heart, taking their cue from *Golden Age musicals*. They prefer the old-fashioned book musical format, and the mid-20th century popular song standard to today's. And, as was the case with its predecessor, *Iron Curtain* stands as evidence that today's musical writers would do well to follow Mills and Reichel's lead.

Starting in New York in the 1950s, *Iron Curtain* follows Murray and Howard, a down-on-their-luck composer-lyricist team who are desperately trying to get a producer to back their latest endeavor: a baseball-meets-the-Devil-type musical comedy called "Faustball." When they read the trade paper announcement of a property similar to theirs—*Damn Yankees*—their hopes are dashed. But, little do they know that their luck will soon change... kind of.

**LIGHTING**

Stephen Arnold

**COSTUMES**

Sidney J. Shannon

**SOUND**

Jeffrey Yoshi Lee

**MUSIC DIRECTOR**

Daniel Feyer

**STAGE MANAGER**

Shani Colleen Murfin

**ORCHESTRATIONS**

Dimitri Nakhamkin

**PRODUCING****COMPANY**

Prospect Theater Company

Meanwhile, in Moscow, Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev is furious over his government's unsuccessful attempts at crafting Broadway-caliber communist propaganda musicals (their latest one, "Oh, Kostroma!", is a bomb). He orders the head of the Ministry of Musical Persuasion, Onanov, to find some ghostwriters to fix the show before opening night, "or it'll be curtains for you and your whole division." Onanov, along with a menacing KGB agent named Schmearnov, travels to America, opens a phony production office (called Onanov Broadway—get it?), and starts accepting submissions. Before long, the downtrodden Murray and Howard come knocking, and the Soviets realize they've found their men.

In no time, the writers are whisked off to Russia, and charged with the immediate script-doctoring of "Oh, Kostroma!" But the show is in terrible shape, and the opening night deadline is looming too close for comfort. Howard is convinced that the show is beyond repair. But, Murray has an idea: "Just suppose we could give 'em a brand new show..." His plan calls for them to rewrite "Faustball" so that it's more apropos for the Soviets: small-town Russian girl travels to America with dreams of Hollywood stardom, but has to sell her soul to the Devil in order to attain it. In no time their opus has turned into "Damnable Yankees," and Murray and Howard are getting their best (and possibly last) shot at show biz success... in exchange for their freedom.

Susan DiLallo's book for *Iron Curtain* perfectly exploits the unspoken age-old rule that anything goes in musical comedy. How else to explain a subplot involving Howard's loyal and faithful girlfriend, Shirley, trekking across continents to find him? Or little things like another character's recurring interest in "dominating" Howard (if you know what

I mean)? Small bits and pieces like those can be found all throughout *Iron Curtain*, and they really help flesh out the credibility of DiLallo's daffy universe. The structure of her book is solid, the jokes are funny, and the characters are convincingly drawn.

The score, by Mills and composer Stephen Weiner, is also top-notch. Their steadfast refusal to acknowledge any modern musical influences is a blessing because it gives the work a more substantive feel. Weiner's melodies are hummable and memorable, and none would be out of place next to many a good ol' classic show tune. And, as they were in *Persephone*, Mills's lyrics are exemplary, displaying a cleverness and intelligence that is rare in today's musical theatre. Consequently, *Iron Curtain's* score contains several terrific songs. Highlights include "Sorriest Team Around," in which Murray and Howard take a song from their show and turn it into a lament for themselves; "The Lapov Luxury," a hilarious number about the Moscow hotel the songwriters get housed in (where there's a "potato on the pillow for every guest"); and "If Not For Broadway," Onanov's big eleven o'clock number where he confesses the extent of his love for musicals (he calls them "miracles that make this earth worthwhile"). This is fun, inventive stuff that will please everyone who hears it.

For the most part, Reichel and choreographer Christine O'Grady's work here is very well done. They know how to execute big musical numbers efficiently, and Reichel understands the comedy part of the term "musical comedy," staging book scenes with an innate sense of how and where to maximize the laughs. The only thing that gets in their way is the size of the intimate West End Theatre, which is too small for the large scope of their vision of the show. Such are the sometime perils of doing indie theatre in New York. By and large, though, director and choreographer make it work and succeed admirably.

*Iron Curtain* is also aided greatly by a superb cast. As Murray and Howard, Jeff Edgerton and Marcus Neville are the perfect leading men, hitting all the right musical and dramatic notes with a disarmingly deceptive ease. Jessica Grove (a *Persephone* holdover), playing Masha, the Russian ingénue Murray is hot for, once again proves that she's leading lady material. Gordon Stanley and Larry Brustofski both shine in the thankless (but important) roles of Onanov and Schmearnov, respectively. Maria Couch is solidly sincere as Shirley, and Bethel B. Austin steals scene after scene as Hildret, the German taskmaster brought in to direct "Oh, Kostroma!" / "Damnable Yankees." *Iron Curtain* also boasts a talented and tireless seven-person ensemble that changes roles and costumes with the best of them.

*Iron Curtain* is proof that they still write 'em like they used to. Mills and Reichel (who are key members of Prospect Theater Company, the show's producer) show us once again that not only is it possible to write a classic-style musical, but it's also worth doing. For this, they should be commended. They are torchbearers of a grand theatre tradition, and they should be encouraged to continue their mission. And, to all you commercial producers and moneymen out there: pick these two up pronto. Give them the bigger, broader exposure they clearly deserve.