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The Book of the Dun Cow: Fantasy's Dual Aim Misses

ATW Review

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Prospect Theater Company

In the new musical *The Book of the Dun Cow*, based on Walter Wangerin, Jr.'s novel of the same name, theatergoers are taken to a time when "the sun turned around the earth and animals could speak." Wangerin's story, re-told for the stage in Mark S. Germain's book, tells of a barnyard of creatures that must battle with Cockatrice and his children, basilisks, all minions of Wyrms, a dark force that lives in the earth's center.

It's a tale that's filled with love, acts of heroism and acts of cowardice that theoretically could make for a delightful, and perhaps even exciting, musical that could appeal across generational lines. Unfortunately, the material here is rendered in a sort of dark "story theater" like manner that vacillates from being too cute for adults to being too intense for young children.

The leader of the animals is a rooster named Chauntecleer (played with a nice blend of arrogance and charm by Brian Munn), who's conflicted because of his innate goodness and guilt over an event he's strived to keep hidden. During the course of the piece, theatergoers see Chauntecleer act not only as the animals' leader, but also as something of a lover, as she falls in love with, marries, and ultimately, has children with Pertelote, a hen whom he finds mysteriously and nearly mortally wounded by the river (brought to life with ethereal dignity by Vanessa June Marshall).

Leading to Chauntecleer's discovery of his love is the arrival of Widow Mouse (a delightful Susan Maris), who's seeking help for her children who are holding onto branches the dip down into the river. Widow Mouse, once the children are rescued, becomes the love interest for John Wesley (a weasel that Robby Sharpe brings exquisitely to life).

All of this action is perfectly charming. Things get much darker though when Cockatrice (brought to life as a sort of malevolent rock star by Micah Bucey), who's behind Pertelote's injury and the plight of Widow Mouse, begins to carry out Wyrms' orders. Chauntecleer and Pertelote's children are slaughtered (the final image of the first act – the puppets representing the chicks lying lifelessly on the stage - left certain young people at the performance I attended more than a little shaken). In the musical's second act, there's a terrific battle that, while not terribly scary, is disturbing because of Chauntecleer's lapse in faith and because of squabbling and animosity that develop between this character and the animals that he leads.

Composer-lyricist Randy Courts has written a score that echoes many contemporary composers for the musical theater. During the course of the piece, strains that bring to mind the work of Stephen Schwartz, Elton John Alan Menken, and even Stephen Sondheim are heard. The music is unquestionably tuneful and the lyrics apt, but Courts' own musical voice never bursts through during the course of "Dun Cow."

Equally problematic is Cara Reichel's staging on designer Paulo Selixas' handsome mutli-level

set. Reichel's direction flashes with invention occasionally – such as when the mouse children are rescued, but overall, the production feels like a two-dimensional pageant, a sensation that is only enhanced by Jessica Hendricks' choreography that bursts a little too much cheeriness. One wishes that Reichel might have been able to more deftly reconcile the piece's disparate tones, making "Dun Cow" either a dark fantasy that can touch the inner child in adults or a fable about faith suitable for children. As it stands, though, "Dun Cow" wavers and in doing so, never truly satisfies theatergoers of either age fully.

The Book of the Dun Cow continues through February 26 at the West End Theatre (263 West 86th Street). Performances are Thursday through Saturday at 8pm with matinees on Saturday at 3pm. There is an additional Monday night performance at 8pm on February 22. Tickets are \$15.00 and can be purchased by calling 2120352-2101. Further information is available online at [Prospect Theater](#).

-- *Andy Propst*

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