

OFF BROADWAY

Not Your Grandma's Theatre

The Book of the Dun Cow

Theatre Review by [Matthew Murray](#)

For the second time this season, a sweeping fantasy musical is unfolding in a theater that should be too small to contain it. But with the Prospect Theater Company's production of *The Book of the Dun Cow* at the West Side Theatre, director Cara Reichel demonstrates again what Charlotte Moore proved with *Beowulf* at the Irish Rep this past fall: The most theatrical thrills and chills require only a heaping helping of stage know-how.

Among the wonders Reichel creates: a daring river rescue, a battle between a veritable barnyard of everyday critters and a pack of demonic lizards, the nightmarish birth of an animal Antichrist figure, and a climactic confrontation between it and the story's hero that could have been ripped from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

And she does it all with only lights, a few essential but trivial props, and 17 actors shuffled and deployed in dozens of configurations. The multitiered set (Paul Seixas), lights (Stacey Boggs), and Reichel's keen eye vividly approximate entire populations and vast vistas real and imagined within cramped Off-Off-Broadway confines. And they do it more effectively than most Broadway shows with hundreds (if not thousands) of times more money at their disposal.

Like Moore's, this is an achievement on par with *The Lion King* for its gutsiness and sheer theatrical beauty. If that show's director, Julie Taymor, didn't fear for her livelihood when Moore unleashed Grendel, she should watch her back now that Reichel has staked her own claim to directorial greatness.

But like Taymor, Reichel is forced to marshal too much of that magic to sell this musical adaptation of Walter Wangerin Jr.'s 1978 novel. Neither Randy Courts (music and lyrics) nor Mark St. Germain (book and lyrics) are capable of bringing the story to life on their own; what they've written only intermittently generates the requisite suspense and tension. The adaptors waver uncertainly between fairy tale, story theatre, outright allegory (though Wangerin has insisted he never intended his book to be taken as such), and

antiwar play in style, and never reconcile the disparate elements of each into one satisfying whole.

For example, the vainglorious Chauntecleer (Brian Munn), the rooster at the center of the story, recalls both the Bible's long-suffering Job and a determined John Kerry. His trusted (and annoying) friend Mundo Cani (David Foley Jr.), a lovable mountain of a dog, is written and played as an uneasy mix of tragic hero and animated-film sidekick. There's little attempt at consistency: This is the sort of duo who would (and does) sing a second-act duet called "Who Needs a Dog?", a precious number about... well, exactly what the title indicates.

It feels like a desperate attempt to lighten up the story for children. But *The Book of the Dun Cow* is, by necessity, thoroughly adult, despite its bevy of talking beasts. Set near the beginning of time, the story tracks closely with the Bible, with the names changed to protect the sinful: Chauntecleer must lead an animal uprising against the godless half-chicken-half-serpent Cockatrice (Micah Busey), the spawn of a subterranean monster known as Wyrn.

But while there's no shortage of violence - a number of major characters perish, often quite bloodily - there's also no shortage of feeling: Cockatrice's attacks and their mournful aftermaths are rendered with surging dramatic and musical passion; there's even a fair amount of levity and spirit in the interactions of Chauntecleer's manic menagerie, which includes a bunch of cackling hens, adorable mice and chicken children, a buzzing mosquito, and more.

Snatches of song, alternating and overlapping, help define everyone; Courts's music also provides crucial, exciting underscoring for the multiple battle scenes. There's also the richly attractive matrimonial hymn, "Remember This Day," sung for Chauntecleer and his bride Pertelote (Vanessa June Marshall) by the sumptuous Carol Hickey as a chicken-coop earth mother; Hickey also returns as the titular character, God's messenger, singing haunting, disjointed melodies at what might be the end of all Creation.

But the second-act opener "Why," examining a great tragedy that befalls Chauntecleer, is too generic in its sentiment to be affecting. And "New Harmony," a thinly veiled ode to pacifism, is so anemically anthemic that Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty could easily have ghostwritten it. Most of the other songs are equally variable in quality, ranging from the attractive to the excrescent; all, however, are exquisitely sung. (Marcus Baker is the musical director.)

The acting, however, is less certain. Only Marshall and Hickey hold their own, giving consistently smart, detailed performances that find all the humanity in their animal characters. Everyone else seems

neither human nor animal, speaking mostly in overexaggerated tones that most grade-schoolers would find trying in a fourth-grade production of *Little Red Ridinghood*.

Munn, who acts entirely through his stuffed shirt and furrowed brow, is especially egregious at overselling the prideful Chauntecleer. Foley's Mundo Cani is oversized and underspecific, as is Alexander Elisa's fox statesman, who behaves as though he's sniffing glue whenever he runs away. The other ensemble members have their moments on and off, though Robby Sharpe strikes mostly the right notes as a reluctant weasel, and Bucey cuts a magnetic figure as the menacing Cockatrice.

He's particularly convincing late in the second act, when he and his basilisk army attack Chauntecleer's group with both physical force and more subversive means. He's a formidable opponent, and he and Wyrn won't be stopped easily; you might find yourself thinking, as Chauntecleer and Mundo Cani do, that victory would require a miracle.

But the real miracle is that they've all been brought so compellingly to the stage. Reichel, who's made a name for herself collaborating with husband Peter Mills on more conventional musicals like *The Taxi Cabaret* and *The Pursuit of Persephone*, has with *The Book of the Dun Cow* come into her own as an artistic force to be reckoned with. Is she the future of the Off-Off-Broadway musical? It's too early to say. But prospects - and Prospect - are looking very bright indeed.

The Book of the Dun Cow

Through February 26

Running time: 2 hours with one intermission.

West End Theatre, 263 West 86th Street between Broadway and West End Avenue in the Church of St. Paul & St. Andrew, second floor

Tickets online and current Performance Schedule: [Theatermania](#)