

Head Over Heels @ New Line Theatre

Songs by The Go-Go's

Based on the novel *Arcadia* by Sir Philip Sidney

Conception and Original Book by Jeff Whitty

Adaptation by James Magruder

Music Arranged by Tom Kitt

Running March 3 – 26, 2022 @ The Marcelle Theater

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New Line Theatre was originally going to perform *Head Over Heels* in March 2020, but the Great Pandemic reared its ugly head and shut it down. Now, two years later, they've come back to finish what they started, with most of the same cast and creative team. I'm glad that New Line was able to bounce back from so many hard knocks; this company is too talented and too enthusiastic to let themselves give up on a musical this good.

The score of *Head Over Heels* is actually the catalog of the all-female rock group The Go-Go's, featuring such pop hits as "We Got the Beat," "Mad About You," "Vacation," "Our Lips Are Sealed," "Heaven is a Place on Earth," and the title song. The story is an adaptation of the 16th-century romance novel *Arcadia* by Sir Philip Sidney. The setting is the ancient Greek kingdom of Arcadia, a place that is controlled by a mysterious force known as "The Beat." The protagonists of the show are the Arcadian Royal Family: King Basilius, Queen Gynecia, the princesses Philoclea and Pamela, the royal counselor Dametas, and his daughter, the handmaid Mopsa. Philoclea, the younger of the princesses, is in love with a shepherd boy named Musidorus – a love that Basilius does not approve of. The older princess, Pamela, is more in love with herself than with any of the potential suitors Basilius presents to her. Basilius's inability to compromise with his daughters earns him a visitation from the non-binary Oracle of Delphi, Pythio. They tell Basilius that his inflexibility will bring about the prophesied loss of Arcadia's Beat. Basilius decides to escape Arcadia's fate by deceiving the entire court into going on a wild goose chase through the forest. However, their journey ends up getting all our main characters caught in a web of deep-seated lies and romantic intrigue.

Head Over Heels is a story about the importance of diversity and acceptance, about letting go of tradition to adapt with the times, and about how the expectations and stereotypes of gender and sex are completely arbitrary. When taking the original sources into account, both *Arcadia* and The Go-Go's discography are about love's universal ability to conquer gender norms, race relations, even class distinctions. However, it isn't heavy-handed; this is a very funny show with lots of broad comedy. The Elizabethan dialogue is adapted wonderfully, and the songs are intelligently utilized.

New Line Theatre fully embraces the fact that *Head Over Heels* is a mashup musical; every production choice was made with the intent to combine the romanticism of the novel with the energy of the music. Director Scott Miller staged this production thoughtfully and carefully;

everyone is on the same page with regards to keeping up with the comical tone and energetic score.

The excellently voiced actors all put in performances that are over-the-top and energized, but done in a way that is genuine and heartfelt, rather than just mugging to the audience. The lead actors are Zachary Allen Farmer as Basilius, Carrie Wenos Priesmeyer as Gynecia, Melissa Felps as Philoclea, Grace Langford as Pamela, Clayton Humburg as Musidorus, Colin Dowd as Dametas, Dawn Schmid as Mopsa, and Tielere Cheatem as Pythio. The ensemble actors are Kevin Corpuz, Evan Fornachon, Chris Kernan, Chris Moore, Maggie Nold, Michelle Sauer, Alyssa Wolf, and Sara Rae Womack. Sauer and Womack are also the production's choreographers, and their vocabulary of movement is impressively acrobatic; this is some of the most intense dancing New Line has ever shown. On the production's opening weekend, Scott Miller lead the superb five-piece rock band, with himself on the piano, Adam Rugo and Jaylen Edwards on the guitars, John Gerdes on the bass, and Clancy Newell on the drums. For the rest of the run, longtime New Line pianist Nicolas Valdez will take up the keys.

The production design is also a mashup. Rob Lippert's minimalist, versatile scenic design consists of stone fixtures covered in vines to establish the 16th-century setting. The costumes by Courtney Gibson and Sarah Porter mash up classical dress with the bright neon colors of 80s pop; further, they outfit the actors in modern headbands and shoes to keep up with the choreography. Kenneth Zinkl's dazzling lights effectively transition between the realism of the book scenes and the fluorescent fantasy of the songs. Ryan Day's sound design does an excellent job of setting the atmosphere as well as making sure the band doesn't overpower the actors. Remarkable, considering that New Line Theatre's permanent venue is the Marcelle Theater, a black box where the actors, the band, and the audience share the same space. However, it's because of this intimacy that the glamour of the performances and the visuals really shine through. The theater is also configured in an alley arrangement, meaning that the playing area bisects the audience down the middle; it feels as if you're stepping into the fairy garden in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the exile's commune in *As You Like It*.

New Line Theatre's *Head Over Heels* is a very energetic, very colorful, and very entertaining production that is well worth the two-year-long wait. It's the perfect musical to begin my first full year of seeing musical theatre since the pandemic hit. Here's to a great 2022!