

## **Kinky Boots @ Tesseract Theatre**

Music and Lyrics by Cyndi Lauper

Book by Harvey Fierstein

Based on the Miramax/BBC film

Ran August 17 - 27, 2023 @ The Grandel Theatre

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In their thirteen years of operation, *Kinky Boots* is the largest-scale show Tesseract Theatre has ever done: a cast of 24 in a 400-seat theater featuring what is by far their flashiest production values. *Kinky Boots* is very uncharted territory for Tesseract, and in a certain aspect, it definitely shows. But with a cast this good, visuals this impressive, and staging this fun, who cares?

Price and Son, a family-owned and operated men's dress shoe factory, has been one of the driving economic forces of Northampton, England for four generations. The closest heir to Price and Son, Charlie Price, inherits the factory after the sudden passing of his father, only to discover that the company is on the verge of bankruptcy. The Price and Son brand is stagnating, cranking out the same boring expensive shoes without having any sort of competitive edge. Charlie never had any desire to own Price and Son – he studied to be a realtor, not a shoe manufacturer – and he is obviously way out of his depth. He feels like he has no other choice but to lay off his workers and shut the whole place down. One employee, Lauren, stands up to Charlie, telling him that in order for Price and Son to survive, the firm needs to move in a new direction, and fast.

Feeling totally stumped, Charlie goes to a pub where he witnesses a mugging. Charlie intervenes only for him to get knocked unconscious. He awakens inside the pub, where he finds out he was rescued by the person he was trying to save, a drag queen named Lola. She ended up using her experience as a professionally-trained boxer to beat the absolute shit out of the thugs. As the pub's headlining cabaret act, Lola and her backup drag dancers, the Angels, bring Charlie inside to patch up while they perform. Utilizing his acumen for shoes, Charlie notices that the dancers' thigh-high stiletto boots, one of the main draws of their act, are clearly not built to support their weight. Then, light bulbs go off in his head – Charlie has just found his new direction. Charlie immediately decides to hire Lola and the Angels to work at Price and Son as designers, working together to build a brand new line of what they dub "Kinky Boots," footwear specifically made for drag performers. But the journey isn't easy; Charlie and Lola both have to face skepticism and mockery from the firm's more conservative employees, as well as having to confront their own troubled pasts in order to work towards a brighter future.

*Kinky Boots* is one of the best musicals to have ever come out of the 2010s. It's a heartfelt, intelligent story that asks tough questions about gender roles, parental expectations, responsibility for community, finding your place in the world, serving tradition while also learning to evolve, and most of all accepting others for who they are. It's a heady show, but Harvey Fierstein's script is smart as a whip, with an intricately humanist writing style and a cast of

memorable, multidimensional characters. The songs by Cyndi Lauper are just fantastic, a perfect textbook example of a pop star crossing over into musical theatre flawlessly. There's a reason why *Kinky Boots* won Best Musical at the 2013 Tony Awards, and why Cyndi Lauper became the first woman to win Best Original Score solo.

I'm happy to say that Tesseract Theatre's production lives up to this standard of quality...for the most part. I'm going to get this out of the way now and say that by far the weakest link of this production was the sound quality. Tesseract elected to use pre-recorded music tracks instead of a live band, and it led to a lot of problems. The musical direction by Nicolas Valdez never had a chance to truly shine. Because of how much Valdez had to coordinate the cast with the track, a good chunk of the singing felt pretty stiff; it's the equivalent of shackling a dancer in manacles, and it doesn't really feel right. The sound design by Phillip Evans felt unbalanced, and the Grandel Theatre's specifications made it extremely difficult for technical director Kevin Salwasser to coordinate the microphones. The sound was marred with issues, and it was very hard to catch crucial lyrics and dialogue. I will excuse Tesseract for this because it's their first time performing at the Grandel with a cast this big, and I know they will continue to improve if Tesseract chooses to produce big shows like this in the future.

I will say, however, that the best aspect of Tesseract's *Kinky Boots* is definitely the acting. The cast is led by Kelvin Urday as Charlie and Tiélere Cheatem as Lola, both of whom share truly passionate, dynamic performances that effectively navigate the internal struggles of two people with some serious daddy issues. The rest of the cast also gives fully realized, memorable performances: Kaitlin Gant as Lauren; Chelsie Johnston as Nicola, Charlie's snobbish fiancée; Kent Coffel as George, the factory manager, and a very brief appearance as Charlie's father; and Marshall Jennings as Don, the factory's hypermasculine, homophobic foreman. Asher Woodward and Mark Ambrose Hill portray the young versions of Charlie and Lola. The Angels are all played by Mike Hodges, Todd Garten, Dylan Stanley, Ronnie Wingbermuehle, Jordan Woods, and Nick Zobrist. The standouts from the factory ensemble are Carrie Wenos as Trish, Loren Goudreau as Pat, and Aaron Tucker, Jr. as Harry.

The cast is directed superbly by Taylor Gruenloh, who also served as the dialect coach and the designer of the versatile unit set that effectively switches between the factory floor, the pub dance floor, and even a boxing ring. The choreography by Maggie Nold is also great – from the grin-inducing voguing of the Angels to the awe-inspiring use of the factory's conveyor belts. Max Demski's lights both razzle and dazzle, as do Zachary Phelp's stunning costumes that impressively convey the change in the characters' hearts and minds (as well as outfitting the cast in every drag costume you can conceive). What is most impressive about the production is that most of the creative staff are students from the Missouri University of Science and Technology, where Taylor Gruenloh serves as assistant theatre professor. Missouri S&T mounted *Kinky Boots* this past spring as well, which was also directed by Gruenloh, so his understanding of the material's heart and humor is totally thorough.

At Tesseract Theatre, a company that produces shows about deep introspection into the human condition, *Kinky Boots* works. It really works, because they work it. This is a truly

groundbreaking production for Tesseract, and it's only going to pave the way for bigger, better projects down the line.