

Nine @ New Line Theatre

Music and Lyrics by Maury Yeston

Book by Arthur Kopit

Adapted from the Italian by Mario Fratti

Based on the film *8 ½* by Federico Fellini

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Federico Fellini's semi-autobiographical film *8 ½* is quite possibly the strangest movie I have ever seen in my entire life. *8 ½* is a surrealist movie featuring bizarre filmmaking techniques that make liberal use of living tableaux and nonsensical imagery. The first time I watched it, I felt like I was having a dissociative episode. I was left absolutely baffled. I watched *8 ½* multiple times because I was so frustrated by my inability to understand what the hell was happening. It was only after I saw New Line Theatre's production of the stage musical adaptation, *Nine*, that I finally did.

Nine adapts *8 ½* into the only other medium suitable for it: a concept musical. Set in Venice circa 1963, the show takes place entirely inside the mind of Guido Contini, a 40-year-old filmmaker who was once hailed as a genius but has recently been experiencing a series of cinematic flops. Suffering from complete and total writer's block, Guido has been scheduled to shoot a film for which he hasn't even written a script. He decides to take a rest cure at a Venetian spa, but even when he's trying to relax, he can't help but think about why this is all going wrong. As Guido flashbacks to various points in his life, we begin to realize that Guido's artistic crisis is actually a quite personal one. At 40 years old, it's starting to catch up to Guido that he is, in fact, a self-centered jerk who treats the people around him like trash, most especially women. He's a womanizer who saps all the life out of any woman he meets and uses them to fuel his creativity, including his long-suffering wife, movie star Luisa del Forno. Guido has had a long string of extramarital affairs that, along with his incredibly busy film career, is causing his marriage to completely fall apart. Seeing how women are his muses, and that he has taken away everything that was important to them, he now cannot write – a story that only Federico Fellini could dream up.

New Line Theatre's *Nine* is akin to Stray Dog Theatre's *A Little Night Music* in that the production succeeds because of its ability to translate film language to the stage. Similar to how Justin Been had to adapt the film language of Ingmar Bergman, *Nine* directors Scott Miller and Chris Kernan (the latter of whom served as the choreographer) had to adapt the film language of Federico Fellini – and boy howdy, it was a challenge. But Miller and Kernan rose to the occasion, giving the show's dreamlike staging a clarity of purpose. They make it obvious from the beginning, with the vocal "Overture Dell Donne," that this story is a fantasy from Guido's broken mind. They place the cast on stage for most of the show to emphasize how much control Guido has over his women, and how much control he doesn't have over his life – which makes it all the more brilliant when the tables turn on Guido as the show progresses.

Scenic designer Rob Lippert configured the Marcelle Theatre valley style, placing the audience on both sides of an abstract unit set consisting of white tiles with striking black outlines and raised benches for the cast. The set is complemented by the all-black costumes designed by Sarah Porter, both design elements owing to the film's black-and-white cinematography. However, lighting designer Matt Stuckel utilizes multicolored lights to cleverly distinguish between the fantasy and reality of Guido's world. Contributing to the Felliniesque proceedings are Richard Brown and Nick Brunstein's props and Ryan Day's sound.

Cole Gutmann delivers a strong performance as Guido, full of the bloviating arrogance a character like this should have while powerfully conveying the cracks in the facade. Gutmann's portrayal of this difficult character is contrasted by a subtle performance from Lisa Karpowicz as Luisa; "subtle" in that she conveys her frustrations with Guido and the rest of his women purely through physical acting choices since she is on stage for most of the time. Stephanie Merritt as Guido's mother smoothly transitions between being hopeful for her son's future and regretful for the way his life turned out. Ann Hier Brown as Claudia Nardi, Guido's leading lady, realistically portrays her increasing anger towards the way Guido has been manipulating her. There are also fun, showstopping performances from Sarah Wilkinson as Guido's mistress Claudia Albanese, Kimmie Kidd-Booker as Guido's producer Liliane LaFleur, and Sarah Lueken as Saraghina – a homeless outcast who was an influential figure from Guido's childhood. Other standout roles include Kay Love as Our Lady of the Spa, the show's narrator, and Gillian Pieper as Stephanie Necrophorus, a detractor of Guido's work who is spitefully hired as his script supervisor. The rest of the all-women ensemble are Kat Bailey, Kathleen Dwyer, Brittany Kohl Hester, Chelsie Johnston, and Julia Monsey. Quite frankly, *Nine* should be performed more often purely to be a showcase for women actors, especially ones that have as excellent voices as this cast does. All of the score's complex melodies and harmonies are effectively managed by musical director Dr. Jenna Lee Moore, who leads the New Line Band with herself on piano, Clancy Newell on percussion, Mallory Golden on violin, Tyler Davis on cello, John Gerdes on the brass instruments, and Lea Gerdes and Joseph Hendricks on the reeds.

Watching both *8 ½* and *Nine* left me feeling the same way I watched *The Last Five Years*: vulnerable. This story really tapped into some deep feelings about my life and career; it forced me to confront all of the sacrifices I had to make and the people I had to leave behind to get to where I am now, and question whether I am a happy man today because of it – just like Guido did. *8 ½* and *Nine* will stay with me for as long as I am making art, and I hope Guido's story is one that continues to be shared. *Nine* is yet another artistic triumph for New Line Theatre.