

## **Something Rotten! @ New Line Theatre**

Music and Lyrics by Karey and Wayne Kirkpatrick

Book by Karey Kirkpatrick and John O'Farrell

Ran September 22 – October 15, 2022 @ The Marcelle Theatre

### **Published October 20, 2022**

*Something Rotten!* is the latest attempt from New Line Theatre to take a Broadway-sized musical (which is to say a visual spectacle with a huge cast) and scale it down to fit their small black box venue in order to heighten and focus on the material's depth. I really admire small theatre companies that attempt to do this, New Line especially; these kinds of productions deliver a kind of powerful intimacy that you normally can't get from a Broadway-sized house. In the case of *Something Rotten!*, New Line Theatre's production made a mostly successful transition to a black box. I say "mostly successful" because New Line Theatre's *Something Rotten!* is one of those productions where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and I'll explain why after the synopsis.

The central conceit of *Something Rotten!*, as imagined by creators Karey and Wayne Kirkpatrick, is if the theatre scene of Elizabethan London in 1595 was filtered through the politics of present-day Hollywood. Here, the greatest playwright of the English language, William Shakespeare, is reimagined as a pretentious, unoriginal, petty rock star whose fans are akin to groupies that follow his every move. The show also reimagines famous Shakespeare characters as real people from the Bard's personal life – after all, artists write who they know just as much as what they know. For instance, the Mechanicals from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are reimagined as a theatre troupe stuck in a rivalry against Shakespeare. The Bard himself used to be a member of the troupe until the director, Nick Bottom, kicked him out for being an annoying little shit. Wouldn't you know it, the story begins with the Mechanicals having to abandon their latest project due to competition from the ever-prolific (and plagiaristic) Shakespeare, and the turnaround for getting their next play off the ground is extremely tight.

Contrary to the literal ass that Nick Bottom is in *Midsummer*, Nick in *Something Rotten!* is a metaphorical ass, but only because of how constantly he is shat on for being a theatre director in the age of Shakespeare. Because of this situation, Nick is at risk of losing patronage from the aristocrat Lord Clapham, and Nick's theatre-loving moneylender, Shylock, is legally forbidden from being a patron because he's Jewish. This misfortune causes Nick to unfairly butt heads with his family: he refuses to let his feminist wife Bea get a job to help them out, and he can't trust his poet brother Nigel to write anything that will top Shakespeare. Distressed by his financial, artistic, and now personal struggles, Nick gives in to his desperation and uses his family's savings to seek out a soothsayer, just so Nick can see how he can be ahead of the curve for once.

The soothsayer that Nick ends up with is Thomas Nostradamus, the nephew of the famous Renaissance prognosticator. The scatterbrained Thomas envisions for Nick a hodgepodge of

information and muddles them together into a clear path towards the biggest trend in the future of theatre: musicals! Thomas then predicts the show that will blow the doors open for Nick's success will be *Omelette: The Musical* (Get it? It's a mispronunciation of *Hamlet*. Hey, it's funny.). I won't go further into spoiler territory, but it's sufficient to say that from here, wacky shenanigans ensue.

*Something Rotten!* is a very tightly-written musical comedy – it's really smart, really clever, sometimes raunchy, but a whole hell of a lot of fun. The show is loaded with well-placed criticisms of William Shakespeare and the culture that surrounded him, acknowledging that the politics of making art during the Renaissance were not so different from today's art world. Of course, the fanboy side of me has to acknowledge the umpteenth-gajillion references to other musicals that are scattered throughout the show, not just in the writing but the score as well. What I love about the musical references is that even though there are an overwhelming number of them, they are used to move the story forward, propelling Nick toward the creation and execution of *Omelette*. I have mad respect for the Kirkpatrick Brothers and their co-writer John O'Farrell for not using the references purely for cutaway jokes, which is something that musicals similar to this one are guilty of (I'm looking at you, *[title of show]*). Finally, I really love that the message of the show is one that we don't hear told in this way very often: financial, artistic, and personal success are entirely independent of each other – if you think they are one and the same, that mindset will lead you to nothing but trouble, which is exactly what happens to Nick.

I am so happy that I finally get to see Chris Kernan in a leading role because he is an utter delight as Nick. Kernan gets the redeemable asshole character type down to a science, and his Nick is great to watch whether he is angry or amiable. He lights up the stage when he shares any scene with the rest of the cast. Kernan has excellent familial chemistry with Carrie Wenos as the strong-willed Bea and Marshall Jennings as Nigel, the more shy Bottom brother. Jennings also has some really adorable moments with Melissa Felps as Portia, a fellow poetry lover who becomes Nigel's love interest. Felps is a great actor for portraying ingenues; she plays Portia with a reticence that transitions into effervescence very smoothly and effectively. Jason Blackburn gets a fun comic turn as Brother Jeremiah, Portia's fanatically Puritan father who will do anything to keep Portia away from Nigel and shut down the Mechanicals' troupe (even if he speaks in nothing but innuendos). The two performers who absolutely steal the show are Clayton Humburg as Shakespeare and Jeffrey Izquierdo-Malon as Nostradamus; both of them look like they are having the time of their lives. Humburg wonderfully hams up the charismatic rock star energy, making him an insufferable prick of a villain that we love to hate; Izquierdo-Malon also hams up, well, the hamminess, with an energetically crazed personality that gives way to some fun physical comedy work.

This is where the flaws that I have with this production come in. First, as strong as the lead actors were, the ensemble was all over the place; they were either kind of monotonous or really over-the-top in a way that stole a little bit of focus. The ensemble performers are Robert Doyle, Chris Moore, Mara Bollini, Kent Coffel, Brittany Kohl Hester, Ian McCreary, Maggie Nold, and Alyssa Wolf, who also serves as the production's choreographer. Speaking of, my second

problem is the Marcelle Theatre has been configured for this production in such a way that Wolf isn't really given a lot of room to create any really impressive choreography; everyone moves around in a way that is kind of flat and really jumbled. My final flaw with this show is a pretty major one: Sarah Porter's costumes. The wardrobe design consisted of modern dress that hinted towards being Elizabethan, an idea that I actually do like, but the execution is very inconsistent. There are some fun touches like Shakespeare's band t-shirts designed by graphic artist Matt Reedy, but the female ensemble all wear dresses that look like they could fall apart at any moment, and the old-age makeup on Izquierdo-Malon's Nostradamus is, to put it nicely, kind of bad. The old-age makeup was extremely cartoonish and, because of Izquierdo-Malon's complexion, the makeup almost looks like he's wearing blackface. Nostradamus's aesthetic does not mesh with the show at all; it was distracting at best and problematic at worst.

However, these glaring flaws are all overshadowed by the fact that everyone on stage looks like they are having just good old-fashioned fun. Director Scott Miller stages *Something Rotten!* with the same level of insight and meticulousness that he gives to every show at New Line, even getting a chance to flex his encyclopedic knowledge of musical theatre on us. The enthusiasm that he shows for *Something Rotten!* is contagious – it's clear that the cast and creative team were encouraged to just really go all out and have fun with this material.

As musical director, Mallory Golden conducts with a sure hand, whipping the cast's excellent singing voices into shape and leading the Upstart Crows Band with Golden on piano, Jack Catalanotto on guitar, John Gerdes on bass, Des Jones on percussion, Joe Akers on trumpet, and Joe Hendricks on reeds. As cramped as the Marcelle Theatre was, scenic designer Rob Lippert created a really cool-looking two-story unit set that very effectively transforms the tiny black box into the Old Globe Theatre. Contributing to the aesthetic are Matt Stuckel's lights, Todd Schaefer's props, and Ryan Day's sound.

*Something Rotten!* is one of the smartest musical comedies to come out of the 2010s, and when you place it in an intimate venue like the Marcelle, it works like crazy. Even though it got semi-muddled in the distillation process, New Line Theatre's production is still proof of a philosophy I have maintained for years: truly great musicals are ones that can be seen, understood, and loved in all sizes, whether they are treated as a big spectacle or as a minimalist ensemble piece. *Long Live the Musical!*