

## **The Karate Kid @ Stages St. Louis**

Music and Lyrics by Drew Gasparini

Book by Robert Mark Kamen

Based on the film written by Robert Mark Kamen

Running May 25 – June 26, 2022 @ The Ross Family Theatre in the Kirkwood Performing Arts Center

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Of all the films that could possibly be adapted into a stage musical, *The Karate Kid* did not initially cross my mind. I watched the film before seeing the pre-Broadway tryout of the new musical adaptation that is currently being housed by Stages St. Louis (by the way, this is the first time the company has ever housed a tryout, and definitely not the last). It was then I realized that musicalization made perfect sense for this story that has spawned three sequel movies, a cartoon series, a remake, and a Netflix sequel series. The recent failure of the Broadway musical version of *Mrs. Doubtfire* made me skeptical at first, but what gave me hope was the involvement of Robert Mark Kamen, the film's screenwriter. Kamen wrote the book for this show (the first musical he's written), working alongside composer and lyricist Drew Gasparini to create a mostly elegant screen-to-stage adaptation.

Even though some scenes and details are changed, the musical is quite faithful to the original film, even retaining its 1984 setting. For all two of you who don't know it, *The Karate Kid* centers around Daniel LaRusso, a teenager who moves with his mother Lucille from New Jersey to Los Angeles to start a new life after the death of Daniel's father. After some frustration that comes with relocation, Daniel immediately makes three new friends: Mr. Miyagi — the Okinawan superintendent of Daniel's apartment who is also a World War II veteran, school brainiac Freddie Fernandez, and cheerleader Ali Mills. Daniel's friendship with Ali catches the attention of Johnny Lawrence, Ali's possessive and controlling ex-boyfriend who just so happens to be a black belt in karate. Johnny and his fellow karate students constantly bully Daniel in the hopes that he'll stay away from Ali. But when Daniel and Ali refused to give in, Johnny and his gang take Daniel back behind a fence and savagely beat him. Mr. Miyagi sees this and rescues Daniel, defeating the bullies with his own karate moves.

Daniel is surprised at Mr. Miyagi's prowess at karate; Daniel begs Mr. Miyagi to teach him self-defense. However, Mr. Miyagi thinks that they can resolve this conflict peacefully; karate is much more about controlling your heart and soul than your body, symbolized here by Mr. Miyagi's prized bonsai tree. They go to Johnny's karate dojo, Cobra Kai, only to discover that Cobra Kai's form of karate is extremely merciless and aggressive. John Kreese, the dojo's sensei and a Vietnam veteran, callously refuses Mr. Miyagi's peace offering. Mr. Miyagi compromises and offers that Daniel competes against Cobra Kai in an upcoming karate tournament, on the condition that the students stop tormenting Daniel until then. Kreese agrees but warns them that Daniel's harassment will be even worse if he fails. The rest of the story is about Daniel and Mr. Miyagi training for the tournament — in both body and mind — using

unorthodox if effective methods, all while Daniel struggles to keep his interpersonal relationships in check.

I realized *The Karate Kid* can work as a musical because, at its heart, it's a Hero's Journey – a story in which a hero sets out on a journey (in Daniel's case, that journey is spiritual rather than concrete), meets a wise mentor figure, finds like-minded companions, and navigates various obstacles leading to a final battle with the evil villain, finally gaining the wisdom they need to be a good person. If you couple this incredibly powerful storytelling form with the abstract language of music, it becomes more emotionally affecting.

Robert Mark Kamen knows this, and he translates the screenplay for the stage in such a way that he turns the film's iconic lines and scenes into moments that feel earned and worthy of setting music to. However, rather than adapting the film's soundtrack for the stage, Drew Gasparini composed an original score that is, unfortunately, very generic. John Clancy's orchestrations and Andrew Resnick's musical direction are serviceable, but most of the songs are written in a contemporary musical theatre style, and the lyrics are too vague to be sung by these characters. It really is a shame because they're still good songs, but this style of songwriting doesn't serve the material. After all, it's pretty telling that the showstoppers in this anti-authoritarian musical are the songs sung by the villains.

The cast is led by John Cardoza as Daniel and Jovanni Sy as Mr. Miyagi. Cardoza looks a bit too old for his role and Sy had kind of a shaky start in the first act, but what made me grow to eventually like the leads was their chemistry together, as well as their fine singing voices. The role of Lucille is a tad underwritten, but Kate Baldwin plays the little time she has with grace, beauty, and heart. Jetta Juriansz and Luis-Pablo Garcia are strong as Ali and Freddie; Freddie's role is greatly expanded in this version – he even gets to lead a fun, upbeat song number in the second act. As fine as Juriansz is as Ali, I feel like she should be given a song expanding on her previous relationship with Johnny, and finding her independence from her uppity parents should figure more into the plot – kind of serving as a parallel to Daniel's relationship with Lucille.

Controversial opinion time: Jake Bentley Young as Johnny and Alan H. Green as Kreese are totally miscast in this. Granted, their songs brought the house down, but that's only because they were overwrought, and St. Louis audiences love their ham and cheese. In adaptation, the villains were made to be more over-the-top than they were in the film, and that really doesn't work here. Young and Green both deliver powerful vocals, but the raw intensity of their dialogue is lost in favor of them trying too hard to appear aggressive on stage. Cobra Kai is supposed to be intimidating and frightening, but I didn't feel it – it came off more as bloviating than sheer confidence. Maybe that's what they were going for, but that interpretation overemphasizes the point of Cobra Kai's existence in the story. A little understating would have been welcome.

Amon Miyamoto's direction places a huge emphasis on simulating motion on stage; considering this is a story all about the importance of movement, that works really well for this show. The choreography by Keone and Mari Madrid utilizes a mix of contemporary dance and martial arts, and the tableaux they create are beautiful. Mr. Miyagi is sometimes surrounded by an invisible

army of dancers that help him perform the karate moves, which sounds great on paper, but is kind of distracting in practice. I especially felt it in the scene where Mr. Miyagi rescues Daniel; on stage, the dancers did all the karate while Mr. Miyagi carried Daniel away. I think the roles should be reversed when the show hits Broadway.

The central motif of the scenic design by Derek McLane is traditional Japanese Shoji screens, which move around to transition between scenes and set the stage; Bradley King's lights also illuminate the screens to create really dazzling stage pictures. Ayako Maeda's costumes remain faithful to the film while capturing the 1980s setting pretty effectively. Also excellent are Dennis Milam Bencie's hair and makeup and Kai Harada's atmospheric sound design.

For a pre-Broadway tryout, *The Karate Kid* shows a lot of promise. The only aspect of this production that I would consider ready for Broadway is the production design, which is a visual marvel. I think this show would be better if the songs were fully integrated into the characters, and if all of the side characters had an equal amount of focus. If these rewrites do happen, and I think they will, *The Karate Kid* will have a pretty decent leg up on the Great White Way. I hope St. Louis continues to be a tryout city for new musicals; I consider it an honor and a privilege that my city is being recognized for the strength, creativity, and adventurousness of its artists and audiences. To the company of *The Karate Kid*, get out there and sweep the leg!