

Curtains

Reviewed By: [Jonas Schwartz](#) · Aug 11, 2006 · New York

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If you're going to perform a song about the villainy of theater critics, cackling that they are "low down bums," you'd better have a critic-proof show. Luckily, *Curtains*, by the legendary team of composer John Kander and the late lyricist Fred Ebb, is so delightful that this critic didn't even mind being called scum. Here's a return to old-fashioned musical comedy, complete with rousing production numbers, a cast of veteran Broadway stars at the top of their game, and a book meant only to tickle the funny bone. The show has audiences cheering long before the curtain comes down.



Kander immediately sets the tone for the proceedings with an overture that would have sounded contemporary during the heyday of Jule Styne and Burton Lane. *Curtains*

begins in Boston on the brink of the 1960s, as a pre-Broadway cast performs a musical called *Robbin' Hood*. The star, a movie actress with no talent, dies during the curtain call, prompting no tears from the cast and crew. The producer (Debra Monk) hopes to re-cast her role with a star who can actually act, sing, and dance. Composer Aaron and lyricist Georgia (Jason Danieleley and Karen Ziemba), an estranged couple, attempt to retool the songs, and Georgia gets roped into replacing the late star. The rest of the cast just wants to go home, but Boston police lieutenant Frank Cioffi (David Hyde Pierce) has quarantined the theater, keeping everyone trapped inside -- including the murderer. For the star's death was no accident.

Curtains is an inventive new work by masters of the craft -- the book is by Rupert Holmes and was started by the late, great Peter Stone -- but it contains many references to shows of the past. If you listen carefully, you'll hear vamps from other composers in Kander and Ebb's score: "Thataway!" has the Oktoberfest sound of "We'll Take A Glass Together" from *Grand Hotel*, and the chorus of "Show People" borrows from "Join The Circus" from Cy Coleman's *Barnum*. Meanwhile, the backstage setting will remind some of *Kiss Me, Kate* and the "Kansasland" number clearly has its origins in *Annie Get Your Gun*. Even what plot can be gathered of *Robbin' Hood* -- it concerns a mild-mannered sheriff and a saloon matron -- can be traced to the musical *Destry Rides Again*. But all these references hardly make *Curtains* a hack job. Instead, the show reminds us of what we're currently missing on the Great White Way.

Plenty of originality can be seen on stage, and so can plenty of extraordinary performances. The character of Frank, a detective more obsessed with fixing the show than finding his killer, is a hilarious conceit maximized by Pierce's dead-on humor. The spoof of torch songs performed by Monk spotlights her wit, Ziemba shines in several musical numbers, and Danieleley delivers two songs that show off his beautiful voice. Jill Paice is darling as the ingénue who may just be a killer. And, in a star-making performance, Megan Sikora compels a standing ovation from the audience with her sexy, spirited dancing and Joan Blondell-type gumption.

Designer Anna Louizos has fashioned an old-time show with modern sets, including a brick-walled backstage area, Ziegfeld Follies-esque curtains for a Gower and Marge Champion takeoff, and a Western look for the show within the show. Director Scott Ellis sets the perfect tone, never making the show seem like a string of jokes connecting songs; on the contrary, *Curtains* comes across a character-driven musical comedy. The show, which will reportedly land on Broadway this season, breathes life into the musical theater even as it serves as a most fitting memorial for Ebb and Stone.