

CASTLE WALK

Review by Matthew Murray

Even serious theatre fans today may be hard pressed to place the names Vernon and Irene Castle, even though a Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers film was released in 1939 about their life and transformative work as an early-20th-century dance team. If you fall into that category — or, heck, even if you don't — you owe it to yourself to hightail it to the PTC Performance Space, where Milton Granger's thoroughly sparkling New York Musical Theatre Festival entry *Castle Walk* is playing through Sunday.

Set during the creation of that movie (*The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*), the musical follows the attempts of Irene, who served as technical advisor, to preserve the history and the memory of her beloved husband, who died 20 years earlier. Under the shepherding of director H.C. Potter (James Clow), the production takes increasing liberties with the details Irene considers most crucial: everything from downgrading her economic background to changing the race from black to white of her faithful servant and friend Walter to adjusting the circumstances of Vernon's death — though wearing a hat on horseback and the color of a shoe strap are, to her, no less vital.

The movie drums up for Irene sumptuous visions that cast the younger version of her (Stephanie Rothenberg) and Vernon (Bret Shuford) in the center of their own RKO romantic spectacle, so we're never entirely certain whether we see the past that was or the past Irene would have preferred. But it doesn't matter, because everything in *Castle Walk* is so glittering and joyous that you never focus on any reality other than that summoned by good old-fashioned theatrical magic.

Granger writes pointed scenes that waver appropriately between wistful and angry, and bewitching songs that evoke classic-Broadway ballads and torch numbers with haunting emotional authenticity. (Jere Lee Hodgkin is credited with "additional material.") Richard Stafford provided the concept for Granger and has staged the show on a wave of pure magic, and choreographed an astonishing number of expansive ensemble ballroom dance numbers that twirl you right into the period. Though the sets are simple, mostly suggested by projections (by Gertjan Houben, who also did the lights), Loren Shaw's costumes are exactly the elegant, piquant designs necessary.

There are a couple of quibbles to be made. Irene's imaginary polluting of the present, in songs about Rogers's Oscar hunger and the impact of Hollywood pill popping, do not feel at home amid the honest innocence of the rest of the score. And bringing out the dancing chorus between the final number and the curtain call, for no reason I could detect, kills the momentum when it should be immortal. But everything else is dynamite, with especially good performances from Clow, the impossibly charming SShuford and Rothenberg, and Wayne W. Pretlow as Walter leading the pack.

At the forefront, however, is the older Irene. I suppose it's possible for Lynne Wintersteller to strike a false note of feeling, to brandish her golden voice (which moves effortlessly from firm belt to riveting soprano) with less than absolute facility, or to be something less than absolutely magnetic onstage, but I've never seen it happen. And it certainly doesn't here. She blends Irene's rage, sorrow, longing, and loveliness into a package that simultaneously breaks and warms your heart, and pinpoints every drop of authority that woman could reasonably bring to bear on the world around her.

Seeing her embody the grace and the commitment to perfection that are so central to Irene is a particular treat that's served up time and time again. "Nothing Underfoot," which finds her revamping modern dance styles for her more rarefied (and, she'd no doubt say, refined) tastes is a key example, but even when she's merely standing her ground against Potter and the studio's interference, Wintersteller invests Irene with stiff shoulders, a straight neck, and the unshakable understanding of *The Way Things Ought to Be*. You can't help but believe every cause she advocates.

Though Wintersteller's every second onstage is an unmissable highlight of this show and NYMF as a whole, her aching "Where Is Spring?" and accusatory "Forever," in which she pitilessly analyzes the eternal importance of getting things right when the movie will eventually stand as the only evidence she and Vernon walked the Earth, are in a class of their own. Just like the Castles, in other words. They don't deserve to be forgotten. See *Castle Walk*, and Wintersteller and Granger will ensure you never, ever do.