

**Review: Waitress**

**By Sara Lamerton**

***Waitress*, Theatre Royal Plymouth**

Fresh from the oven, the West End smash hit musical, *Waitress*, brought to us by Grammy award-winning Sara Bareilles, a book by acclaimed screenwriter Jessie Nelson, and direction by award-winning Diane Paulus, carries its scrumptuous aroma to Plymouth until 26th March.

In all honesty, I didn't know what to expect from *Waitress*, even though I'd formed some preconceived judgments before taking my seat. The promotional materials gave little away about the wider storyline, but what they did scream was fun, friendly, and frivolous. They weren't wrong. *Waitress* is all those things. But I wasn't anticipating the emotional rollercoaster *Waitress* would take me, and the rest of the audience, on. How it would mix, fold and whip us into this American-Fairytale-Fantasy Pie world, holding us there as we followed Jenna, the phenomenally talented Chelsea Halfpenny, as she negotiated her way through cathartic twists and turns, emotional ups and downs, and life changing revelations and breakthroughs.

Yes, *Waitress* is a love story, but not in the format you might have come to expect. Complex in nature, yet simple at its core, *Waitress* is more than just a tale of idealistic romantic love. As Jenna comes to terms with an unexpected pregnancy after a regretful night of unprotected sex with her abusive husband, her character is tempted by the passionate embrace of the married Dr. Pomatter, Matt Jay-Willis, who's affection, admiration and interest in her comes as a refreshing, yet complicated change from the neglectful, narcissistic demands of her husband Earl. However, her 9 month journey is not alone. Accompanied by two colleagues turned loyal friends, who, despite their own struggles and insecurities, prove their love is enduring as the threesome negotiate the next stages of their lives.

Led by an all female creative team, it's clear to see the bond of friendship and the complexity of love, in all its forms, are key themes. The female characters are strong and nuanced, troubled yet relatable, supporting and honouring themselves and the connection they've forged. The men, on the other hand, are not so likeable. With some incredibly toxic characters in the mix, even if they have a few likeable qualities, there is one unexpected hero amongst the lot: Joe, Michael Starke, who owns the Diner Jenna and her friends work at, is a presence that grows in prominence and stature as the story unfolds. His quirky charm and genuine affection for Jenna and her perfect pie making talent is delicate and untainted, leaving a bittersweet taste in your mouth as he lovingly nudges her towards self-belief and her ultimate destiny.

Surprisingly emotional, *Waitress* asks important questions about the nature of long term relationships, happiness, living in the moment, and finding the path that's right for you. Jenna's reticence at becoming a mother is underlined by a constant thread of the close bond with her own that's impacted so heavily on her life to date. And, as we come to see, that fierce maternal spark is just waiting to set the world ablaze.

*Waitress* is certainly surprising, but what's guaranteed is you will laugh out loud and you will cry, but in no way will you be disappointed by this delectable slice of musical pie. It's not hard to see why it received standing ovations night after night in the West End. It certainly received one last night, and I'm sure will continue to do so throughout its run at TRP, and beyond.

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