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Castle Walk at NYMF JULY 26, 2013 BY RICHARD SEFF

The tenth anniversary season of this valuable festival, [New York Musical Theatre Festival](#), is just concluding. By final curtain on July 28th, it will have presented some 350 new musicals in nine years, 24 of which have moved to off Broadway, 3 to Broadway, 86 of them have gone on to other productions after starting at NYMF, and 16 have had original cast albums cut.

In this age of ridiculously expensive on and off Broadway productions, clearly this Festival serves a loyal following of fans, and an equally grateful army of writers now being denied the old fashioned route a commercial life via a simple out-of-town tryout.

In the 1940s *Oklahoma!* by the “new” team of Rodgers and Hammerstein played Boston for a few weeks, then opened its 8 year run on Broadway at a cost-to-first night of \$80,000. In recent times, shows have often started at NYMF, gone on to “workshops” or “readings”, then played one engagement in a regional theatre, then come in to town — for upwards of \$10,000,000! The road gets rougher, but somehow dreams die hard, and musicals get written.

One such is *Castle Walk*, now concluding its allotted 5 performance run at the PTC Performance Space at an attractive 555 West 42nd Street venue in New York. I know the routine, for I was fortunate to have such a production of *Shine!* in 2010, to which I wrote the book to a score by Roger Anderson and Lee Goldsmith. When you have a director and choreographer who know what they are doing, as we did, and certainly as does *Castle Walk*, the results



can be enormously useful

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Producers no longer seem capable of reading a script, hearing a score, and committing to a production. No, now they must see the material up there on a stage, as fully mounted as possible. Only then can they decide whether or not to offer the potential of a run and meaningful income to the creators and their casts. I hope that some such producer has a look at this musical, with its book, music and lyrics by Milton Granger, as directed and choreographed by Richard Stafford. That's two gifted artists doing the splendid work of five!

Castle Walk is an imaginative and ultimately moving story of the brief but spectacular careers of Vernon and Irene Castle. Not remembered by many now, as the posters for this show proclaim: "Before Fred and Ginger, there were Vernon and Irene, the original Dancing Stars." For indeed they were all the rage in the early 20th Century, and remained so until Vernon's untimely death in World War I. This musical is set in 1938 when RKO Pictures was about to film "The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle" starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, for which, as technical advisor, they have hired Irene Castle to come to California - to advise.

In a one-act, two hour format, they have written some 18 musical numbers, with an ensemble of six dancers and six actors who populate the backstage story of Mrs. Castle's encounters with the films director H.C. Potter, with Ginger Rogers, with Potter's secretary-assistant, and most prominently with a man called Walter Ash, who was a lifelong friend and mentor to Irene.

With great dexterity, Richard Stafford has managed to weave back and forth from 1938 to 1912 to the young Irene and Vernon much in the way Hal Prince and Michael Bennett did in *Follies*. Little by little we learn how the Castles met, what their childhoods were like, how the one, a Brit, (Vernon), and the young American (Irene) created an internationally adored dancing act that led to the kind of stardom enjoyed twenty years later by Astaire and Rogers. In addition to the adroit staging, there are several other surprises in this spritely production.

The score is a genuine theatre score, limited in scope only by the limitations of the period. But it has great range, and Mr. Granger's lyrics sit comfortably on his lilting melodies which puts him firmly in the Jerry Herman, Irving Berlin, Harold Rome pantheon of composer-lyricists. Maybe not quite up there musically with these three and the incomparable Cole Porter and Stephen Sondheim, but close. However, he tops them in that he is also an excellent librettist, and his dialogue smacks of reality and is laced with wit, particularly in a scene where Potter explains to Irene

how film and real life must now and then part, and in another where Vernon explains why he, as a British subject, feels he must take an active role in the war, Mr. Granger proves himself a very potential full time playwright.

Considering the limited two and a half week rehearsal allowed, and the very low budget, the achievement in casting is remarkable. Lynn Wintersteller, who plays Irene, is to me a revelation. Much of her previous work has been done regionally, but in this she is delivering a true star turn. There is a lilting ballad ("Where is Spring?"), a deft song telling us what dancing means to her ("Nothing Underfoot") and a couple of soliloquies ("Forever" and "Everything Matters") that have weight and wisdom way beyond what I expected from a song and dance bio of a couple of hoofers. Miss Wintersteller could carry everything from *Lady in the Dark* to *Mame* and with a lovely voice that tops the two great stars who created those roles. (For you young 'uns, they would be Gertrude Lawrence and Angela Lansbury).

Bret Shuford is charming and attractive as Vernon. If his British accent is a bit unsteady, no matter. He can sing, he can dance, he has a most appealing manner and the attraction between him and Stephanie Rothenberg as the young Irene is immediately apparent. He and his young vis a vis have three numbers in which show us why these two were able to rise from a comic in a Lou Fields revue (he) and a chorus dancer (she) to the magazine cover dancing darlings of their era. Young Mrs. Castle in particular became the model for virtually everything from hair style to clothing. Every woman wanted to look like Irene Castle.

James Clow makes the director of the Castle film a lively and accepting spoke in the studio system wheel. Compliant and professional, he has his hands full with the likes of the outspoken and dedicated Irene, who cannot bear the studio routine of replacing truth with more audience friendly fiction. His handling of the song "Pills" makes him valuable to have around when doing a musical; he sings and dances with the best of his accomplished cast colleagues.

Wayne W. Pretlow completes the cast as Walter Ash, a black father figure for Irene. He was a man whose taste she trusted, whose advice she sought (but often to her regret, ignored). His big number is "Crash!" with which he nearly stops what would be the second act of the show.

This lovely musical may have trouble finding a suitable home after NYMF, for it's a bit large for off/Broadway and not quite large enough for the Big Street. Though one thinks of *Once* which had precisely the same problem when it first surfaced in a tiny theatre, and is now in its second smash year "uptown". So I wish this one well, for if they don't fool with it too much, if they don't try to fill it with "names", if they don't add a slew of dancers to make it grander, I think it might well find an audience as enthusiastic as the one that included me. I wish them luck, for it's truly deserving.

It's just the sort of show for which NYMF was created.