

Chicago's Political Machine Runs Relatively Swimmingly in Strawdog Theatre's 'Old Town'

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CHICAGO – As a testament to its set design, it wasn't immediately clear if certain structures were naturally part of the Strawdog Theatre space or if they were fabricated specifically for the "Old Town" production. It turned out to be the latter as this story of Chicago's political machine unfolded with song, dance, wit, a relatively large cast and a 10-piece live band.

In double-sworded fate, this relatively large cast turned out to be both a blessing and also its burden. The story's set at a fictional hotel on election night where the Weltz dynasty wrangles with the Chicago voting public. Despite characters galore, Kat McDonnell as Cindy Weltz – the daughter of the man who's currently running but just can't cut it – melts nearly everyone else away.



Karen Mosher (Shannon Hoag, left) digs up a scandal between the Cook County president's daughter (Cindy Weltz) (played by Kat McDonnell, center) and campaign manager Daniel Deering (John Ferrick, right) in Brett Neveu's world-premiere musical "Old Town," which runs from April 27 to May 31, 2008 at the Strawdog Theatre in Chicago.

Image credit: Don Cardiff

While she's musically sound, it's her raw emotion – really it's her face – that tells the true story every actor strives for. McDonnell (a Strawdog ensemble member) always looks like she's about to burst into tears, and though she never does and even finds reason to rejoice, she authentically wears her heart on her sleeve.

As well, Strawdog ensemble member John Ferrick plays Daniel Deering with the vigor you'd only find in the campaign manager of a man who's running for president (not of the U.S. but of Chicago's Cook County). He's a two-faced balance between a man who flirts the shady political grey matter and another gentleman who merely longs for love.

While the leader of a musical quartet sounded best when his trio chimed in and the gaggle in general was a nourishing addition to the show, lighting was exactly the focused lens it needed to be. The behind-the-scenes band set an apt mood with the added benefit of actually being there to do so.

"Old Town" direction at the hands of Kyle Hamman fit like a glass slipper. The choreographed movement flowed like a majestic waterfall. Background bodies were always present and neither detracted from the spotlight nor added too much to it, which helped to keep the scene active and feeling like a vital night in Chicago.

While Gregor Mortis nailed casting with decisions in McDonnell, Ferrick and a few others, the play beamed a bright light on some lucid weak links. Alternating between such natural talent and such an unnatural lack thereof drew you in, knocked you out, drew you back in and knocked you back out.

Either a smaller, more focused cast or more McDonnell-like actors and singers would have turned what deserved a bravo or two into a boisterous standing ovation.

"Old Town" runs through May 31, 2008 at Strawdog Theatre at 3829 N. Broadway Ave. in Chicago. Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. Sundays at 7 p.m. [Tickets](#) [14] cost \$20.

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