

SHOW BUSINESS

Wednesday, November 7, 1990

THEATER REVIEWS

"PRETTY FACES"

Musical by Robert W. Cabell
Directed and Choreographed
by Gene Foote

At the Actor's Outlet Theater
120 West 28th Street

Reviewed by David Lefkowitz

No doubt, seminally influenced by the "Dance 10, Looks 3" number from "A Chorus Line," young Robert W. Cabell has fashioned a feather-light musical about a tonload of threes—or what American society perceives as threes. Cabell's "Pretty Faces," now brightening the Actor's Outlet on West 28th Street, concerns the contestants in a beauty pageant for hefty women. Unlike the usual backstage comedies, "Pretty Faces" steers mercifully clear of jealous infighting—here the corpulent chorus line bond and genuinely root for each other.

Which doesn't mean there aren't complications. Pageant hosts Monique and Roger are having their usual lovers' tiff, Stage Manager Carter (Michael Winther) has a crush on the equally smitten Bobby-Joy (Kathleen Rosamond Kelly), but she thinks he's hot for another, and Pleasure (Amy Ryder) becomes petrified on hearing that her parents will be in the audience. All major problems are eventually (and too easily) resolved, as are the countless minor ones. Terribly clichéd as these plot twists may be, they do approximate the feeling of chaos, when gigantic and miniscule crises collide, that must accompany actual contests.

So evident are the flaws of Cabell's show, it's easy to get weighed down, listing them and forget how entertaining, from beginning to end, "Pretty Faces" is. Twenty-six musical numbers pack the two-hour show—many of them mild, too many of them of the confessional-monologue variety—but they don't bore. Cabell's no Cole Porter for lyrics, ("She's messing up my life/her words cut like a knife" is a groaner), and he's susceptible to generics: "Are You The One," a love duet between Carter and Bobby-Joy, makes reference to pushing aside their questionable sexual histories—a meaningless lyric since C & BJ are the most virginal couple since Sally Field and Alejandro Rey. Still, Cabell keeps the tunes short 'n bouncy, winning us over with the amusing "Too Plump For Prom Night," the recurring

"Sleep Walkers Lament," and Bobby-Joy's star-spangled, baton-twirling, "Song For Jesus."

Because his plot is pure kitsch, Cabell hits trouble when he injects "serious moments." Amy Ryder's a good singer and a winningly wry actress, but she can't rescue "Daddy Doesn't Care" from its own weepiness. We don't care, because we're given nothing more than a minimal, second-hand account of Pleasure's home life. Daphne's (the talented Amy Jo Phillips) big number, "Purple Hearted Soldiers," is a better song, but it comes equally out of the blue.

Saving the weaker numbers and phonier passages is a game cast, of whom Michael Winther is the most appealing. His shy, nervous-nellie Stage Manager would be caricature in lesser hands; Winther, effortlessly, keeps Carter grounded both in reality and in the pleasing conventions of musical comedy. Lynn Halverson gives pageant host Monique the right mix of pride and prejudice, while co-host Charles Mandracchia, a decent singer and actor, has the kind of looks that make ordinary mortals like me curse God and question our existence on this planet. As the harried director, Ron Meier sings well, but his performance is forceless and unconvincing.

Of the beauties, the aforementioned Ryder and Phillips make the strongest impressions, although Liz Leisek gives Dolores an ethnic sizzle, and Heather Anne Stokes and Kathleen R. Kelly are fine as "Too Plump" Patricia and Bible belle Bobby-Joy. I'm not sure if the comic number involving one contestant's kinky thrills from an obscene phone call is discomfitingly sexist or ultra-feminist, but Margaret Dyer makes it an engaging bit either way.

Viewed as a traditional musical comedy, "Pretty Faces" has no business working as well as it does. Maybe it's Peter Rogness' exceptional set, which turns black and white into a rainbow of possibilities. Maybe it's Gene Foote's snappy direction. Maybe it's the sheer gusto of creator Robert Cabell. Or, maybe it's just the good company of a good company. But somehow, for all its sins, the thing feels like a musical. And that always tips my scale.