

WOW! I ONLY HAVE EYES FOR YOU

By Steven Stanly | StageSceneLA

An Oscar-winning lyricist finally gets the star treatment he's been heretofore denied in the thoroughly entertaining *I Only Have Eyes For You – The Life And Lyrics Of Al Dubin*, a big-stage/big-budget musical treat whose big challenge will be to convince anyone too young to know the difference between Carmen and Lin-Manuel Miranda to take a chance on a musical that may be arriving about fifty years too late to be a Broadway smash.

Al Dubin's story is certainly worth telling, and with Jared Gertner of *The Book Of Mormon* fame bringing him to irresistible life, producer Corky Hale has found precisely the right star to play the loveable yet tormented genius that was Al.

As for the songs that brought Dubin fame and fortune on both coasts (including an Oscar shared with longtime collaborator Harry Warren), *I Only Have Eyes For You* has what any jukebox musical worth its quarters must, and twenty of them at that.

A WWII War Bonds rally introduces us to Al's wife Helen (Nikki Bohne) as well as to director Kay Cole's toe-tapping choreography before flashing back to the couple's meet-cute, a prelude to twenty-plus years of a decidedly rocky marriage.

But before wedding bells can chime, the pint-sized, pudgy, perfectly adorable Al must head off to the WWI trenches, an experience whose long-term effects (they called it shell shock back in the days when PTSD went undefined and untreated) are as much of a surprise to the audience as they are to a smitten Helen.

I Only Have Eyes For You doesn't whitewash the otherwise sunny Al's darker sides, including his addictions to alcohol, gambling, and flirting with the opposite sex. Still, since we've first gotten to know Al in good-guy mode, we remain resolutely on his side, particularly with the oh-so likeable Gertner playing him with infectious charm and impressive pipes.

It's no wonder then that Al managed to overcome the initial resistance of composer Warren (Constantine Rousouli), with whom he ended up co-writing such hits as "September In The Rain," the Oscar-winning "Lullaby Of Broadway," and the title song, meeting along the way movie greats Ruby Keeler (Kayla Parker), Al Jolson (Justin Michael Wilcox), Busby Berkeley (Robert Pieranunzi), Carmen Miranda (Renée Marino), and Cab Calloway (Elijah Rock).

Jerry Leichtling and Arlene Sarner's book can't completely escape biopic clichés, but it does a mostly quite fine job of letting us get to know Al Dubin warts and all, finding clever ways to combine pre-written songs with plot, and still leaving room for one excitingly staged and choreographed production number after another including the delightfully quirky "Mechanical Man," the high-kicking "42nd Street," the dark and jazzy "Boulevard Of Broken Dreams," and the Calloway/Miranda showcases "Lulu's Back In Town" and "South American Way."

The book's Hollywood happy ending, on the other hand, conveniently ignores Al's divorce and remarriage let alone his untimely

death from barbiturate poisoning and pneumonia at the age of 53.

Wearing both director's and choreographer's hats, *A Chorus Line* legend Cole does some of her finest work to date, her actors adding dimensions not necessarily on paper and her dancers executing one thrilling step after another in styles ranging from tap to jazz to ballroom to ballet. (Even set changes get choreographic pizzazz.)

Gertner's superstar lead performance is complemented by the lovely and vocally gifted Bohne as Helen, and if Broadway triple-threat Rousouli is a whole heap handsomer than the real-life Warren, I for one am not complaining.

Syd and Ruby Parker's lithe and graceful Ruby, Wilcox's pitch-perfect Jolson, Rock's fleet-footed Cab, Marino's firecracker of a Carmen, and Pieranunzi's charismatic Busby are all fabulous, as is Valerie Perri, whether as icy Jewish mom, Broadway hooper, or vocal stunner.

Ensemble members Julian DeGuzman, dance captain Jeffrey Scott Parsons, Dominic Pierson, Kim Taylor, Katherine Tokarz, and Karl Warden dance, sing, and play assorted cameos to Broadway-caliber perfection, with special snaps to Warden and Taylor for their exquisite pas de deux.

Musical director Gerald Sternbach conducts *I Only Have Eyes For You's* topnotch ten-piece orchestra (Jack Lipson is assistant musical director) in addition to providing expert and vocal and dance arrangements.

John Iacovelli's clever proscenium-filling scenic design morphs into multiple locales (L.A.'s Union Station is a particularly winning touch as are the show's scenery-moving uniformed stage hands), though I have to admit I didn't much care for the tweedy backdrops.

Debra McGuire's colorful Broadway finery and assorted period wear earn top marks as does Judi Lewin's hair, wig, and makeup design. Brandon Baruch's lighting is flashy when flash is needed, subtle when subtlety is what the script ordered. Cricket S. Myers' crystal-clear sound design and Marissa Bergman's multiple props are winners too.

As Broadway musicals about Marilyn Monroe, Legs Diamond, and Edward Kleban have made abundantly clear, unless it's Carole King or *The Four Seasons* whose lives you're recounting in drama, dance, and song, bio-musicals are among the toughest of tough sells.

I Only Have Eyes For You – The Life And Lyrics Of Al Dubin is a crowd-pleaser, make no mistake about that. What lies ahead is convincing younger generations who've turned *Hamilton*, *Rock Of Ages*, and *The Book Of Mormon* into Broadway blockbusters to give an old-timer like Dubin his long-overdue due.

Ricardo Montalban Theatre, 1615 Vine Street, Hollywood.