

How Arena Stage made its ‘Pajama Game’ feel very 2017

By **Lori McCue**

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Tim Rogan got the same response from lots of people when he told them he’d be starring in Arena Stage’s production of “The Pajama Game.” “Their immediate reaction was, ‘Oh, my God! I love that show!’” Rogan recalls. This surprised him, because he’d never seen a production of the show, or even the famous 1957 film adaptation.

“I mean, I knew some of the songs, like ‘Steam Heat’ and ‘There Once Was a Man,’” Rogan says. “But the show was genuinely unfamiliar to me.”

Alan Paul, who directs Arena’s production of George Abbott and Richard Bissell’s 1954 stage musical, is counting on the fact that much of the audience will be coming to the show fresh as well. He and Arena Stage artistic director Molly Smith chose “Pajama Game” because “it was a title that everyone knew, but they didn’t know it nearly as well as they knew ‘West Side Story,’ for example,” he says. “I thought it would allow the audience to experience something new.”

Rogan plays Sid, the new superintendent at a pajama factory where Babe (played by Doris Day in the film and by Britney Coleman in Arena's production) is about to lead her fellow employees in the union to strike. Babe and Sid fall in love, of course, and must decide where their relationship fits within the fight between management and the union over a raise of 7½ cents per hour.

"It's not so far removed from where we are now," Paul says. "There's still pay inequity all across our country. You think 1954 is really different in all these ways, but in a lot of ways it really isn't."

One critical way that the script really feels different in 2017, however, is in its gender politics. Sid, after all, is a high-ranking supervisor who repeatedly hits on his employee while at work. What was played off as romantic in the film and in the original productions is more problematic today.

"What I've tried to do with that character is to give him a journey so that he has to grow up during the course of the show and that his missteps are immaturity, they're not that of a predator," Paul says. "Sid becomes much more sensitive and aware of his behavior by the end of the show. ... And we've been very careful, so far, that when they kiss, that [Babe] initiates it, or things like that, to make sure that she has the upper hand and has control."

To play Sid, Rogan drew more inspiration from the book the show was based on, Bissell's "7½ Cents," than from John Raitt's brawny, cocksure portrayal of the character in the film.

"There were so many moments of Sid's internal dialogue" in the book, Rogan says. "You think that guys just had this unwavering confidence back then, but then to hear him talking to himself, he's like, 'This is going horribly, she's never gonna like you.' ... I'll be working on that balance for the whole run, finding those moments to let that creep in."

In the end, Paul and his team set out to make a “Pajama Game” that’s familiar to fans of the musical but that also holds surprises for new viewers, like impressive swing-inspired choreography and a story that touches on class and pay inequality.

“The more we’ve looked at it, the more dimensions there are in it,” Paul says of the show. “I think [the audience] will see new things in it because we did too. I hope they do.”

Arena Stage, 1101 Sixth St. SW; Fri. through Dec. 24, \$41-\$120.

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