

## The Producers

In this film version of the Broadway smash (winner of 12 Tony Awards in 2001), director-choreographer Susan Stroman doesn't mess much with success, mostly letting the camera focus directly on her own much-lauded staging of "The Producers," Mel Brooks musical reconception of his classic movie comedy of 1968. Since "The Producers" was among the most honored musicals ever, perhaps it is understandable that Stroman--directing her first motion picture after a stellar stage career--hews to a conservative approach, adapting gingerly what she had already fashioned on stage, and leaving us with a filmed record of a boffo hit.

The goofy story line is familiar from Brooks' original 1968 film: A Broadway producer Max Bialystock (Nathan Lane) with a long string of failures teams up with his nebbish accountant Leo Bloom (Matthew Broderick) to produce a flop in order to pocket the investments of little old ladies in a show that can possibly show a profit. But their "Springtime for Hitler: A Gay Romp with Adolph and Eva at Berchtesgaden" is a surprise hit, exposing their fraud.

In fact, Stroman's minimal-change approach works well enough, especially for fans of the musical. For them, it will probably seem just fine, essentially a reprise of the raucous stage work that they relished in the first place, with the bonus of seeing Nathan Lane's googly eyes up close. For newcomers to the work, the film might seem both dated and bombastic. Stroman once or twice moves beyond the studio and tries shooting in real New York, but in such instances, nothing is added (for example, when "Along Came Bialy," the number with dozens of dancing old maids in walkers moves out on to Fifth Avenue) and the mood of silly caricature is somewhat broken. In general, though, she stages the dance numbers well for the screen, letting the camera stand back to see the real steps rather than indulging in the jump-cutting around the dancers that mars some recent movie musicals (viz. *Chicago*).

For sure, *The Producers* is both garrulous and garish, loud and lusty. There is nothing subtle here; the primary direction is right over the top. The players all work hard, perhaps too hard in some cases. Nathan Lane's Bialystock is raging--and very funny--and in select moments brings back an uncanny feeling of Zero Mostel in the original film. He is also very musical, in voice and body, more so than his co-star, Matthew Broderick, an adequate nerd who sings with a reedy voice and whose conventional baby face makes his hysterics seem forced. His bland looks work best in the up-beat "I Wanna Be A Producer."

Will Ferrell and Uma Thurman, the only principals not from the original Broadway cast, come on strong to start and never let up as nutty Nazi Franz Liebkind, author of the worst stage work ever, "Springtime for Hitler," and Ulla, Swedish wench-cum-secretary with legs up to her neck. With their one-note performances and ripe accents, I felt their schticks went on too long, though Ferrell does a good job with the eminently goofy "Haben Sie Gehört Das Deutsche Band," and Thurman moves well in a dance duet with Broderick. Among original cast members, Gary Beach and Roger Bart almost flame out in reprising their parts as a stunningly gay director and his (Wo)Man Friday.

Though it may be coarse and crude, what still works in this musical version of *The Producers* is Mel Brooks' outlandish sensibility-- his equal opportunity mockery of every class and kind--and his still golden one-liners, right out of the Borscht Belt. The film is also, in its blunderbuss way, a rude, yet sweet, valentine to The Show Business and all its bathos and nuttiness. *The Producers* is a long stroll (with kicks) down the Great White Way, leaving some gum stains and dog poop behind.

(December 2005)