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9 to 5: the musical

music and lyrics by Dolly Parton, book by Patricia Resnick,
choreography by Andy Blankenbuehler, directed by Joe Mantello **World Premiere**

Ahmanson Theatre • September 3 – October 19, 2008 (Opened 9/20, rev'd 9/21m)

reviewed by *Cristofer Gross*

Putting the goods up front has always worked for country-pop icon Dolly Parton. And, true to form, *9 to 5: the musical* wastes no time in filling the Ahmanson Theatre with the nudging eighth-note thump of the 1980 film's title tune. Unlike the characters who sang it, the song rocketed to the top, taking the #1 spot on Billboard's pop and country charts and earning the singer-songwriter an Oscar nomination and two Grammy Awards. But thoughts that this musical version (through October 19) is resting on past laurels without anything new to back it up can be dismissed. Rich in talent and ideas, this *9 to 5* parallels the Parton lyric "don't judge me by the cover, 'cause I'm a real good book."

That opening song is the only "cover" in a show directed with firm control and great originality by the brilliant Joe Mantello. Nineteen new songs weave through a "real good book" by Patricia Resnick, the film's screenwriter. They include "Backwoods Barbie," a Parton mini-biography (with the above quote) that is the title track of Parton's February 2008 CD.

The story is set in a microcosm of the American workplace at the dawn of the 1980s. Typewriters clack away as dinosaur copiers chew documents. An aloof executive, Franklin Hart, Jr. (Marc Kudisch) terrorizes his employees, cheats on his wife Missy (Lisa Howard), and hits on Doralee (Megan Hilty), a hard-working staffer who happens to like looking like a showgirl. While she forsakes easy advancement by rejecting Hart's advances, he spreads rumors to the contrary through his devoted office manager, Roz (Kathy Fitzgerald). That isolates her from the other women, including the leader of the workers, Violet (Allison Janney). Violet, three years a widow and with a teenage son to raise, regularly sees the promotions she has earned go to men she has trained.

The show begins as Judy (Stephanie J. Block) arrives in an outfit Polyanna would have worn (William Ivey Long created the beautiful period ensembles). Making it clear that unfair practices extend from boardroom back to bedroom, the script introduces a divorcing Judy, cut loose by a husband seeking younger, looser women. She, Violet and Doralee will eventually split their differences and become friends as they share Cannabis-fueled fantasies of smoking the boss. Unintentionally, one of the plans gets played out and they spend Act II trying to avoid getting caught for kidnapping.

Like the movie, the musical slips its message about the workplace inequalities and indignities suffered by women into a universal message. The song, in fact, is a non-discriminatory blast at exploitation of workers of both sexes. Thanks to Kudisch's wonderful characterization, Hart is hateful, but with just the right cartoon shading. Maybe it's too many performances of *Pirates of Penzance* on Broadway, but in his introductory number, "Here for You," his oily overtures recall the glinty-toothed smarm of Disney's Captain Hook. That the sycophantic Roz looks like Smee is



Megan Hilty
Stephanie J. Block
Allison Janney

PHOTO CRAIG SCHWARTZ

continued



another invitation to Disney world (confirmed by Violet's fantasy in Snow White dress and Minnie Mouse hair bow).

Musically, Parton works her crossover magic with country, Nashville and pop styles. She is well-served by Stephen Oremus' crisp direction of one of the finest pit bands in memory, richly delivering the range of styles from lush ballads to a funky instrumental break that would make Quincy Jones envious.

The cast is excellent down to the last dancer, and though Janney may not be a Broadway singer, she acquits herself just fine. Mantello's decision to trade off for a lead better grounded in acting (and with the appeal of her "West Wing" celebrity) is welcome. Like all the leads – including Fitzgerald – she makes the most of the showcase solos Parton has created. In addition to Hilty's "Barbie" number, she gets a domestic pop duet with her husband (Charlie Pollack) that could get Parton back with the Gambler for a charting of those "Islands in the Stream" waters. Block's self-determination epiphany, "Get Out and Stay Out," is the kind of great stand-and-deliver Broadway moment that builds to an audience-tingling climax. As the show really gets its legs, the audience may well find its and give her a mid-act standing O.

While the women's fantasy numbers – including one for Roz – are what Broadway audiences pay to see, they come at the expense of neglected story development. However, with a Scott Pask set that seems to reconfigure as quickly and magically as a kaleidoscope – thanks in part to a massive diamond vision screen for an upstage wall – it's a gripe that hardly seems worth making. (One forced perspective projection creates a black and white noir world right out of a Stanley Kramer film.)



But for all her charming music, Parton owes her success to Mantello and choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler, who pass control of the action back and forth in a fluid exchange. Blankenbuehler inserts plenty of story-specific gestures into his moves while seamlessly incorporating phones and other office machines into the movement. Montello beautifully manages the overlapping time frames: providing a sense of the mini-arc of a nine-to-five workday (beginning with the percussive swatting of morning alarm clocks); the longer arc of Judy's beginning career; and the play's kidnapping plot (including a "where-they-are-now" epilogue that sums up entire lifespans).

**top: Megan Hilty,
Marc Kudisch**

**bottom: Block,
Janney and Hilty
corner Kudisch**

CRAIG SCHWARTZ

While the show's office machinery may be a thing of the past, office gossip and sexual politics are not. Parton and Resnick don't want to suggest that they are, just to prop up their good time musical. Does "9 to 5" attempt to give a status report on progress, or just leave the issues in their 1980 time capsule? Even with its cartooning, "9 to 5" does, subtly, wear the mantle that "this represents a turning point." It does take advantage of a scene in which (under Violet's temporary management) some advances are made to salute our progress and acknowledge we're on the right track. It's a momentary tie down to the real world, but it's one more good reason to leave "9 to 5" feeling good.

WITH Allison Janney, Stephanie J. Block, Megan Hilty, Andy Karl, Kathy Fitzgerald, Marc Kudisch, Ioana Alfonso, Timothy George Anderson, Jennifer Balagna, Justin Bohon, Paul Castree, Dan Cooney, Jeremy Davis, Gaelen Gilliland, Autumn Guzzardi, Ann Harada, Lisa Howard, Van Hughes, Kevin Kern, Brendan King, Michael X. Martin, Michael Mindlin, Karen Murphy, Mark Myers, Jessica Lea Patti, Charlie Pollock, Tory Ross, Wayne Schroder, Maia Nkenge Wilson, Brandi Wooten **MUSICIANS** Stephen Oremus, Conductor/Keyboard; Matthew Gallagher, Associate Conductor/Keyboards; Brian Scanlon, Woodwind 1; Rusty Higgins, Woodwind 2; Chris Eble, Trumpet 1; Marissa Benedict, Trumpet 2; Robert Payne, Trombone; Craig Ware, Trombone 2; Brian Reardon, Guitar 1; Jay Leach, Guitar 2; Ken Wild, Bass; Sean McDaniel, Drums; Marvin Gordy, Percussion; James Sitterly, Violin; Miguel Martinez, Cello **PRODUCTION** Scott Pask, set; Jules Fisher + Peggy Eisenhauer, lights; William Ivey Long, lights; John H. Shivers, sound; Peter Nigrini, Fisher + Eisenhauer, imaging; Paul Huntley, wigs/hair; Alex Lacamoire, dance arrangements; Bruce Coughlin, orchestrator; Stephen Oremus, music direction and vocal/song arrangements