

# BUSTIN' OUT ALL OVER

**Marianka Swain** was impressed by a revival of *Carousel* at the Arcola Theatre on June 24

It's often the song and dance that saves classic musicals. Long after the plotting has been labelled flawed, the characters thin or the subject matter unpalatable, it's those show-stopping numbers that keep audiences happy, with the narrative acting merely as filler before the next big jazz-hands moment.

Not so with Morphic Graffiti's innovative reimagining of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel* at this diminutive east London studio theatre. Luke Fredericks' energetic production tackles the story problems head on, mainly succeeding in grounding the expansive tale and giving credible inner life to its characters.

Moving the New England fishing village action from the 1870s to the 1930s helps enormously, adding a grittier context in the form of the Depression and build-up to World War II. When carousel

barker Billy Bigelow and millworker Julie Jordan risk losing their jobs in order to pursue their romance, that decision carries far greater weight, and Billy's desperate criminal action is more understandable, if no less tragic.

Refreshingly, the performers aren't miked, and the natural singing, supported by a five-piece band (including harp!), lends the songs a thrilling immediacy. Gemma Sutton provides a subtly heartrending Julie, her nuanced performance beautifully suited to the

small space. She has believable chemistry with Tim Rogers' Billy, and, though her vocals are in a different league from his, Rogers brings passionate commitment.

The secondary characters are also given more heft, with Vicki Lee Taylor and Joel Montague as Julie's preening friend Carrie and her ambitious fisherman suitor Enoch, able to combine scene-stealing comedy with honest emotion. Richard Kent is strong as sly spiv Jigger, Amanda Minihan is a robust Aunt Nettie, and Valerie Cutko makes the most of her near-cameo: widowed carousel owner Mrs Mullin is imbued with melancholy.

Fredericks' naturalistic approach runs into trouble in the second half, when Billy literally ascends into the

heavens as part of his redemptive arc, but Lee Proud's vivid choreography is an enormous asset in bridging such gaps. It shifts from the acrobatic flurry of the circus to visceral movement underlining the physical hardship and simmering sexual tension, and finally evokes the otherworldly with an exquisite dream ballet – all with very limited floor space.

Being in such close proximity to the performers does mean slip-ups are glaringly obvious, so this is not one for those whose enjoyment of ensemble work is dependent on perfect synchronisation and stylistic unanimity. But if you like your musicals teeming with life, this is a hugely satisfying renaissance of a beloved show. ●



Tim Rogers as Billy Bigelow and Gemma Sutton as Julie Jordan in *Carousel*.

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