

A showman's mythology unshackled

MATTHEW HAYS
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Houdini

Directed by Bryna Wasserman

Book by Ben Gonshor

Music and lyrics by Elan Kunin

Starring Kevin Kraft

At the Segal Centre

in Montreal to March 2

When the audience arrived at Montreal's Segal Centre on Tuesday night, they were met by members of the cast of *Houdini*, the original new musical based on the life of the legendary magician and showman. The cast began the show in the lobby, putting on a vaudeville shtick before leading everyone into the theatre. It's a fitting start to *Houdini*, a musical biography about the life of one of the pivotal figures in early-20th-century show business.

Director Bryna Wasserman clearly understands the rich potential for a musical based on Houdini's life, drawing on the period during which he first gained fame. And there's a Montreal hook: It was a couple of punches to the stomach at McGill University that would exacerbate Houdini's appendicitis, leading to his untimely death at the age of 52 in 1926.

The musical has become noteworthy as a combined effort of the city's anglophone and francophone cultural communities, with the Segal Centre and the High Lights Festival's Alain Simard co-producing.

The show begins with a then-unknown Houdini and his brother struggling through a series of low-rent gigs. Kevin Kraft, who breathes life into the magician, pulls off the have-I-got-a-magic-act-for-you shtick well.

The first act, in which we learn more about Houdini's overbearing mother, the courtship of his wife and the birth of the escape acts that would make him a star, is engaging and appealing. Elan Kunin's songs are suitably upbeat and catchy - reflecting Houdini's remarkable rise from obscurity to international fame.

First-time playwright Ben Gonshor is relying heavily on new revelations about Houdini's life, which were published in William Kalush and Larry Sloman's critically acclaimed 2006 book *The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero*. That tome provided more details of the magician's connection to the spiritualist movement, made up of people who believed they could communicate with the dead. A figure no less than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle became a champion of the spiritualists. But after one particularly dismal seance, during which the spiritualists purported to connect with Houdini's late mother, Houdini would become committed to debunking the entire movement.

Gonshor incorporates these elements in the Houdini mythology to solid effect. (The seance scene, in particular, is a standout.) While showing us a few of his escape-artist tricks, this original musical also intrigues with its behind-the-scenes tales of his battle with the spiritualists, who became furious at his criticisms. It makes for a curious irony - that Houdini, someone whose success was predicated on magic and illusion, was repulsed by what he saw as the phoniness of the spiritualists and became obsessed with ruining them. The universally spirited cast shifts gears extremely well, vacillating between cheese-ball stage antics to the more serious public spat that engulfed Houdini in his final years.

Houdini stumbles a bit in the second act, when the magic becomes secondary to pushing the story forward. Keeping the magic coming would have helped maintain the unflinching preintermission pace.

Still, the overall effect of *Houdini* is a good one, neatly fusing comedy, romance and new dimensions to his mythology. Houdini himself would have been amused, spooked, titillated and entertained.

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