

Berkshire Living POOL BOY Review

California has come to Pittsfield, Mass., in the guise of the Hotel Bel-Air, a fantasy world of poolside cocktails, seductive women, and promises of fame, all set to a tuneful, catchy pop-rock score. When the lights come up on *Pool Boy*, the brand-new musical by Nikos Tsakalacos and Janet Allard, we see a turquoise oasis, the Spanish-inflected architecture shaded by palm trees, and the three-man band—keyboards, guitars, and percussion—framed by a central arch. The score dominates the show, with the songs coming rapid-fire.

Nick, the pool boy, works at a Los Angeles hotel, in a surreal environment of wealth and privilege, where the ridiculously entitled few are served by the obsequious workers who dream of joining the ranks of the rich and famous one day. Nick, played by Jay Armstrong Johnson, is trying to keep his job by following the instructions issued by Mr. Lopes, the tough boss who runs the hotel.

The talented cast is strong, from Jon Norman Schneider as Jack, who skewers the stereotype of a Japanese chef, to Cliff Bemis as Lopes, particularly in the gruff rendition of his song, 'Learning the Ropes.'

One of Nick's first tasks is to persuade Donna Duval, the wife of a famous record producer, to put her bikini top back on, which he tries to do under the scrutiny of Mr. Lopes. Nick finds a way to tell Donna that he is an aspiring musician, catching her interest. Sara Gettelfinger is terrific as Donna, and her marvelous singing voice makes the song "Potential" a high point in the show. John Hickok is effective as the hard-edged record producer who can advance Nick's career, and Sorab Wadia delivers the over-the-top sultan who recruits Nick as his assistant.

The characters of the record producer, his seductive wife, and the spoiled and over-indulged sultan are certainly broad stereotypes, but the skilled cast, under the deft direction of Daniella Topol, makes the most of the roles. But because the story unfolds in a world where self-serving, manipulative behavior is acceptable, the characters, even Nick, are hard to like.

Nick's love interest is April, a personal assistant and aspiring actress. We first see, and hear, Cortney Wolfson as April in the compelling number "She Swims." At this point in the show, the combination of sliding shoji-style screens and soft turquoise lighting effects create a very effective night-time poolside atmosphere and the attraction Nick and April feel is expressed through the song, one of the best in the show. Wolfson is appealing as April and her singing is excellent; her second act number, "Swimming to China," is also a show highlight.

Brian Prather's set looks great, as do the costumes by Holly Cain, complemented by Nicole Pearce's effective lighting design.

The world premiere of *Pool Boy* is a production of the Musical Theatre Lab under the mentorship of Tony Award-winning composer and lyricist William Finn. *Pool Boy* was given a staged reading here last summer, and it still seems to be a work-in-progress. The tacked-on ending doesn't really work, and the show feels too long. The version I saw last year at the reading had a sweeter, more appealing Nick, as I recall, and bringing him back might be a good thing; we need one character in the show to root for.

It's an entertaining evening with strong performances and several go-away-humming-the-tune songs in the score. But ultimately, the show suffers from the lack of a sympathetic protagonist.