

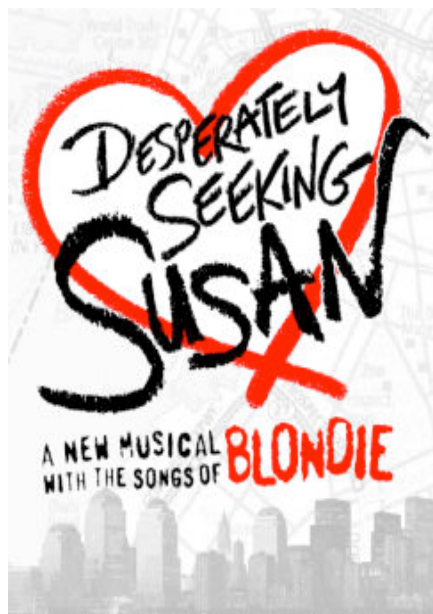
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Desperately Seeking Susan

Novello Theatre, London



It sounds like a clever idea: a stage adaptation of the 1985 film starring Madonna and Rosanna Arquette set to songs by Blondie. Roberta Glass is a bored housewife who becomes obsessed with reading the personal ads, where she picks up on the meetings between wildchild drifter Susan and young buck Jay. She starts following Susan (who's the unwitting target of baddie thug Alex after her ex-boyfriend gets pushed out of a hotel window), ends up buying her jacket from a vintage store and sets up a meeting with her to return a valuable earring she finds in the pocket.

Alex, mistaking her for Susan, gives chase and Roberta bumps her head, suffering amnesia. Jay's brother Dez, who has come to check on Susan, assumes Roberta is his brother's girlfriend and takes her home to make sure she's okay. Cue inappropriate romantic blossomings, much confusion over mistaken identity, worried husbands and irate boyfriends until everything eventually gets straightened out.

The plot of *Desperately Seeking Susan* is all about confusion, and that works brilliantly in the film, with its twists and turns, countless locations and forceful personalities. The

musical version falls down straight away, however, due to its over-ambitiousness; the plot and locations are copied across almost to the frame. In a film, a short scene in one place followed by a longer scene somewhere else can flow seamlessly; on a stage there's a gap while the scenery moves around. A phenomenal number of set changes crammed into 2 hours twenty minutes, this makes for an unsteady flow, even without the seemingly inevitable mechanical breakdown that happens just after the start of the second half tonight and keeps the audience waiting for its repair.

The inclusion of hit songs by Blondie in the production is a fun idea in theory but disappointing in reality. The musical theatre style of singing does not suit legendary pop punk material, and much less so when the vocal talents of the lead performers are this lacking in quality and spirit.

Their acting skills aren't much better, with awful hammy American accents from almost everyone and a generally brittle, nervous energy on stage. Movement from the chorus line is dismal and perfunctory, jarring with the music and adding nothing to the overall atmosphere.

The sets, however, are impressive, not only in number but in their evocation of vintage 1980's style and slavish copying of the film sets - complete with rooftop swimming pool! - but the inclusion of a moving walkway for baddie Alex to use while singing 'One Way Or Another' is clumsy. Costume design is much better, again copying details from the movie so devotedly that if you ran in to a dressed-up Emma Williams down a dark alleyway you'd think you were face to face with the Queen of Pop herself.

As Susan, Williams channels Madonna well with her adopted swagger and attitude, but lets down the Blondie side of things with a shrill, unsure singing voice. Kelly Price (Roberta) has a soft, sweet voice reminiscent of Debbie Harry but is also nervous and unsure throughout, stumbling over her words at the end of 'Heart Of Glass'. They aren't helped by the constant set changes or the appalling front of house sound either, one minute blaring out of the speakers, the next much too quiet.

The boys are similarly patchy; Alec Newman (Dez) is a good actor but a lousy singer and Mark McGee (Jay) is the epitome of the annoying, cheesy surfer dude musician character with an annoying propensity towards fake bravado and an overegged style. Relief comes from Leanne Best (Leslie) who gives an assured performance as Roberta's sister-in-law, and Victoria Hamilton-Barrit (Maria) as the invented-for-stage-so-they-could-use-a-modern-Blondie-song character Maria, the Glass' maid and surprise knockout vocalist of the show.

What a shame. With its admirably high hopes and grand aspirations, *Desperately Seeking Susan*'s stage adaptation seemed like a sure thing, playing on the 80's revival and the public's enduring love for Blondie. But after witnessing the mess that was this musical, it was no great shock to hear that it has since closed down just a month after the grand opening night, following bad reviews and poor ticket sales.

Cast List

Emma Williams - Susan
Kelly Price - Roberta
Mark McGee - Jay
Alec Newman - Dez
Jonathan Wrather - Gary
Leanne Best - Leslie
Steven Houghton - Alex
Victoria Hamilton-Barritt - Maria

Directed By

Angus Jackson

Reviewed by Laura Kidd October 2007