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THEATER

Cagney: Hollywood Legend Gets His Due In Musical

BY DAVE GIL DE RUBIO

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While most people view James Cagney as the prototypical hard-boiled gangster affiliated with the Golden Age of Hollywood, the musical that bears his name does yeoman's work in painting this storied actor as far more multi-faceted than that. Robert Creighton, who plays the title role, also co-wrote the music and lyrics with Christopher McGovern. Coupled with a book by Peter Colley, *Cagney* is a powerful mix of song and dance while hop-scotching through the actor's life and revealing him to be a regular guy from the Lower East Side, who happened to be a gifted song-and-dance man with a nose for acting. Housed within the intimate confines of the Westside Theatre's upper level (which is roughly 200-plus seats), *Cagney* is an intimate theatrical experience where props are effortlessly swapped on and off the stage for settings ranging from Hollywood sound stages and the site of the 1977 Screen Actors Guild Awards to a Hell's Kitchen apartment and the Keith Music Theatre on W. 81st St. In keeping with the cozy confines of this production, only six people make up the cast. While Creighton (who bears a remarkable resemblance to the late thespian) only plays the lead, his castmates



Robert Creighton (center) with the cast of *Cagney*

do a stellar job juggling multiple roles. Bruce Sabath's turn as tyrannical studio head Jack Warner winds up being the perfect villainous foil for Creighton's everyman Cagney. Equally impressive as the singing and music is the depth and complexity of the choreography, led by Jeremy Benton, whose Bob Hope is one of the

many hats he dons. One segment in particular finds Benton and Creighton, having a dance-off that will delight anyone with even a slight appreciation of tap. Ellen Zolezzi, who originated the role of Cagney's wife Willie back in 2009, fits hand-in-glove with Creighton and Broadway star Danette Holden (*Shrek the Musical*) is also a revelation thanks to an impressive range that finds her going flawlessly from Ma Cagney to harried Warner assistant Jane. Finally, Josh Walden equally shines via his turns as Cagney's trusted brother Bill and a flamboyant movie director. The pinnacle of the show comes during Cagney's turn in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, which finds the troupe tearing into a George M. Cohan medley and the "Yankee Doodle Dandy" finale. And while Cohan's compositions make up roughly 30 percent of the evening's music, what is all the more impressive is the fact that the remaining songs are Creighton/McGovern originals that seamlessly flow into these standards that date back a century plus. *Cagney* winds up being a throwback to Hollywood's golden age movie musicals tied up in a delightfully small package.

Cagney is playing at the Westside Theatre, 407 W. 43rd St. in Manhattan. For more information, visit www.cagneythemusical.com or call 212-239-6200.

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James Cagney: Tough Guy In Tap Shoes

BY DAVE GIL DE RUBIO

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Despite only standing 5'5", the late James Cagney stands tall in the annals of Hollywood history as the quintessential oxymoron—a cinematic gangster who was a song-and-dance-man. With a career that spanned from his days on the vaudeville circuit to a storied career during the Golden Age of Hollywood, Cagney's creative shadow loomed large right up until he died of a heart attack at the age of 86 on March 30, 1986. With the most recent nod to his legacy being the smash Off-Broadway musical *Cagney*, the following are some of his most notable roles.

The Public Enemy (1931)

The film that was Cagney's breakthrough role featured him as Tom Powers, a youth who goes down a path of crime during the Prohibition. Based on a never-published novel by two former thugs who witnessed a number of Al Capone-generated violence around Chicago, this Daryl Zanuck production featured Cagney's infamous scene where he mashes a grapefruit in the face of his girlfriend Kitty (Mae Clark).



James Cagney pulling a fast one in 1931's *The Public Enemy*



James Cagney (far left) behind-the-scenes of 1955's *Love Me Or Leave Me* with co-stars Doris Day and Cameron Mitchell (Photo courtesy of Turner Classic Movies)

Love Me Or Leave Me (1955)

Cagney received his final Oscar nod for playing Martin "Moe the Gimp" Snyder, a gangster who was also the first husband/manager of Doris Day's nightclub singer/dancer Ruth Etting. Day was recommended by Cagney to play the female lead in this musical romantic biopic about Etting's life. It wound up being one of Cagney's top five films he made and was also the last time he ever played a gangster.



Yankee Doodle Dandy (1942)

Cagney won his only Oscar playing the title role in this musical bio-pic about storied Broadway composer/playwright George M. Cohan. As a fellow Irish-American who had honed his singing and dancing in vaudeville, not unlike Cohan, Cagney was the perfect choice. Not only was he able to get away from the gangster typecasting, but helped further popularize Cohan standards like "Over There," "Yankee Doodle Boy" and "Give My Regards to Broadway."

White Heat (1949)

In his quest to break playing stereotypical gangsters, Cagney hadn't played one for nine years before being wooed back to play Arthur "Cody" Jarrett, the psychotic lead character whose dysfunctional relationship with his mother dictated this performance. It also features one of the great finales for a doomed bad guy which features Jarrett crying out, "Made it, Ma! Top of the world!" to his deceased mother before blowing himself up.



James Cagney's sociopathic Cody Jarrett in 1949's *White Heat*



James Cagney (far right) with frequent co-star and close friend Pat O'Brien in *Angels With Dirty Faces*

Angels With Dirty Faces (1938)

This Academy Award-nominated performance found Cagney playing gangster William "Rocky" Sullivan, whose rise and fall in the criminal world winds up with a date with the electric chair. Sullivan's reputation influences local kids The Dead End Kids, and when Cagney's character is on the way to getting juiced, he is convinced by Pat O'Brien's parish priest to beg for his life so as to turn the gang's admiration to scorn.

To read a review on the Off-Broadway show *Cagney*, go to page 4A.



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