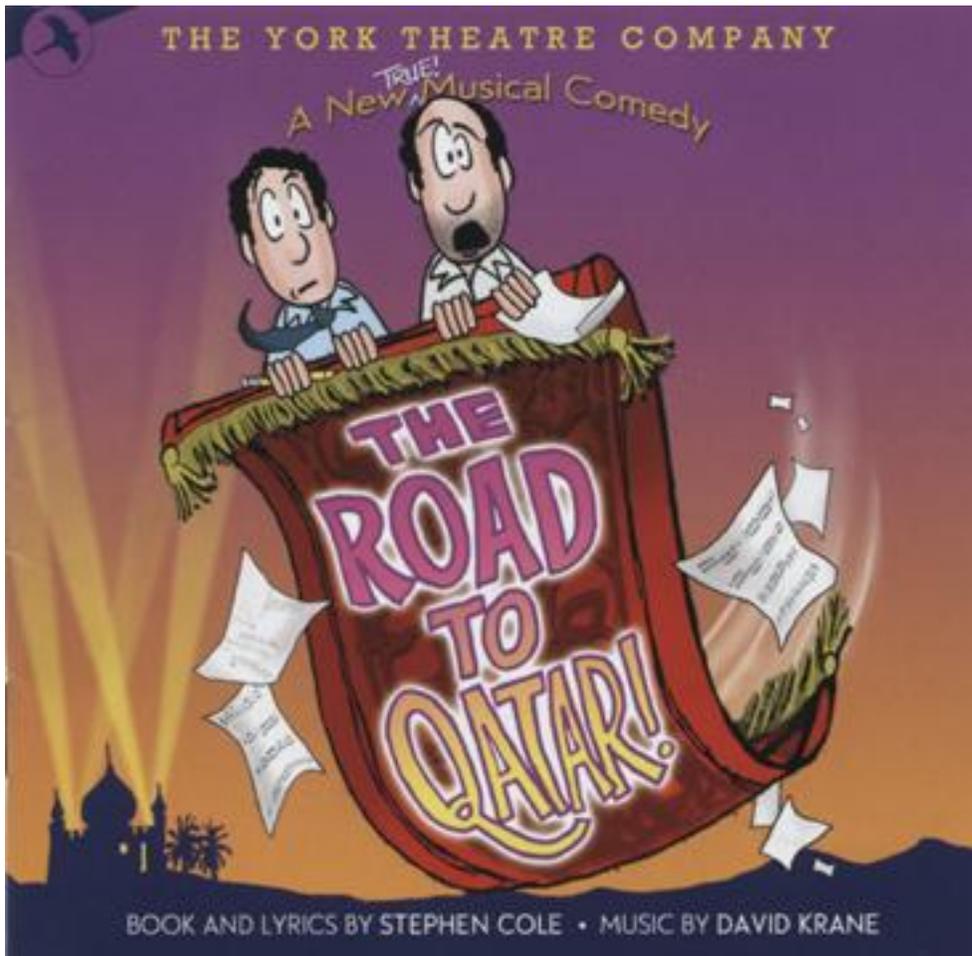


Chicago Stage Style

June 2012 CD Reviews by Joe Stead

The Road to Qatar and After the Fair

My faith in musical comedy just got a jump start with the arrival of a recent Off Broadway CD called "The Road to Qatar". And let me tell you that in the aftermath of "Queen of



the Mist," to say nothing of "American Idiot," "Rock of Ages" and "Spider Man Turn Off the Dark," it was a badly needed adrenaline fix. The title, as you can probably already guess, is a valentine card to those delightful screwball Bob Hope and Bing Crosby "Road" pictures that found the duo in one exotic locale after another, with laughter, adventure and a lovely lady along for the ride. This one, if we can believe lyricist/librettist Stephen Cole's intriguing album liner notes, is actually true. But even if it were just the product of a wildly theatrical imagination, "The Road to Qatar" would be one terrific and wacky musical destination.

I first became aware of Mr. Cole's work over a decade ago as the lyricist and librettist of the charming and underappreciated little gem "After the Fair," and the dark and haunting "The Night of the Hunter". But more on those later in the review. Cole is also a successful ghost writer of celebrity biographies, at least one of which I have highly recommended to readers of this site. In his most recent musical, produced last year Off Broadway by the York Theatre Company, Cole and composer David Krane relate their own real-life experience of being hired to create an original 90-minute musical play by the Emir of a colorful Middle Eastern city called Qatar.

The show within a show (and its superb Jay Productions recorded counterpart) introduce us to a likable couple of short New York Jews, previously unknown to one another, who both receive a mysterious email invitation to collaborate on a lucrative entertainment with some suspicious strings and conditions attached. We see the boys maneuvering uncharted territory as they negotiate fees (paid supposedly in three installments), flesh out a sketchy scenario and try to work with a ragtag multinational company to arrive at their final product that will earn a cushy commission and hopefully not humiliate their reputations and



Bill Hahn, Keith Gerlach, Sarah Wiley, James Beaman and Bruce Warren

artistic aspirations. Does musical theatre really have the power to change lives? You bet it does. Almost from the moment I inserted this deliciously self-referential cast album into my CD player, I could feel myself transported to that never, never land of musical comedy mirth where anything is possible with a tappy tune, and where dreams really do come true. David Kane's

bubbly score is irresistibly melodic and Stephen Cole's lyrics smart, incisive and hilarious. In the meta-musical genre, "The Road to Qatar" far usurps the throne of "Spamalot," outshines "Urinetown," and is every bit the match of Mel Brooks' "The Producers".

The only question I have is why some enterprising Chicago theatre company has yet to snatch it up? While we're at it, any savvy Broadway producer would be well advised to bring it to the Great White Way before planning the next major revival of "Gypsy" starring Sutton Foster. What most shows these days lack in originality, wit and tunefulness, "Qatar" makes up for in abundance. And with a talented and versatile cast of five and a crack band of musicians, this excellent Jay CD brings the tale to life with melody and merriment to spare.