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Posted: Thurs., Jun. 3, 2010, 3:40pm PT

Johnny Baseball

(Loeb Drama Center, Cambridge, Mass.; 490 seats; \$77 top) An American Repertory Theater presentation of a musical in two acts with book by Richard Dresser, music by Robert Reale and lyrics by Willie Reale. Directed by Diane Paulus.

Johnny O'Brien Colin Donnell Daisy Wyatt Stephanie Umoh Tim Wyatt Charl Brown Babe Ruth Burke Moses Wally Schang/Tom Yawkey Jeff Brooks Chick McHale/ Yawkey's Crony Robert McClure Cronin/Manager Joe Cassidy Willie/Harold Alan H. Green Fan No. 9 Charles Turner

By [FRANK RIZZO](#)

The damn Yankees aren't the only baseball team with a musical-theater hex. The Boston Red Sox deal with their own fixed fate onstage -- one with darker implications -- in the cleverly crafted and terrifically performed new tuner "Johnny Baseball," receiving its first ups at Beantown's (Cambridge, really) American Repertory Theater. Helmer Diane Paulus hits a clean line drive straight into center field with a thoughtful, crowd-pleasing and deftly balanced show that even a Yankee could love.

Johnny Baseball

As she has done throughout her first year as the innovative artistic director of the Harvard-based theater, Paulus has opened up the playing field, producing shows that attract a wider, younger and nontraditional crowd with works that please and provoke. This one should especially draw -- and satisfy -- fathers and sons, not exactly your target musical audience.

With "Johnny Baseball," the challenge is considerable because of its beloved (depending on whom you root for) subject matter. Scriptor Richard Dresser (whose Off Broadway two-hander "Rounding Third" is a regional staple) has dramatized the Sox's long-running "curse," which kept them from winning a World Series for 86 years.

While many believed the Red Sox's misfortune was rooted in the fact that the team sold Babe Ruth to the Yankees, the tuner takes another view: It was racism, not a bad deal, that doomed the Sox, as explained by an elderly black man (Charles Turner) to a young boy (Erik March) between innings of a fateful playoff game in 2004.

Jumping back and forth in time from the contempo long-suffering (and very funny) fans in the bleachers to 1919, then to the late '40s, the show at first centers on a fictional player, a straight-arrow Irish orphan boy dubbed Johnny Baseball (Colin Donnell), the Sox's new pitching sensation. But when Johnny falls in love with a beautiful black singer, Daisy Wyatt (Stephanie Umoh), the team owners step in.

The first act is driven by the basic narrative, pleasant tunes by Robert and Willie Reale ("A Year With Frog and Toad") and especially the humor generated by the bleacher bums. But the two lead characters are one-dimensional, and the audience pretty much knows where the first-act curtain is headed: noble love thwarted by the times and prejudices of a far-away time.

It's the second act that brings the work to real life and closer to home. The flashbacks now center in postwar era, when the Sox are lagging behind other teams in integrating their roster. Another dazzling rookie -- this time a black youth with ties to the past, Tim Wyatt (Charl Brown) -- is trying out for the Sox, and the curse is renewed. Only with time, understanding and forgiveness (and a mixed roster) does the long penance end. It's a conclusion both glorious and bittersweet.

Perfs are first-rate, especially from the sterling ensemble. Donnell, as Johnny, sings like a dream, and Umoh glows with goodness. But their characters are almost too good to be true.

As the Babe, Burke Moses is a master of matter-of-act bravado and delivers the show's best lines. (His dainty run around the bases is a comic gem, too.) Standouts from the fans include Paula Leggett Chase, whose mixed-emotions lament ("Not Rivera") is a hoot, as well as Carly Jibson and Kirsten Wyatt's comic bits.

Paulus, an expert at ensemble helming ("Hair"), shows her stuff again, this time with a staging assist from choreographer Peter Pucci. No fielders' ballets here; the entire show is grounded in natural speed, ease and grace.

Tunes, backed by an expert eight-piece band, are well crafted and varied, including Irish jigs, comic-patter songs, heartfelt numbers and a standout uptempo-jazz duet ("See You in the Big Leagues") between Willie Mays (Alan H. Green) and Brown's Wyatt, both trying out for the team. Less memorable are a pair of ballads for Daisy that should stand out but are easily forgotten.

Cutting some of the more arch dialogue ("Get your head out of the clouds, Johnny Baseball!"), adding shading to the lead characters and upgrading a few songs could help the show make it to the big leagues. With: Carly Jibson, Kaitlyn Davidson, Kirsten Wyatt, Paula Leggett Chase, Charles Turner, Erik March.

Songs: "Eighty-Six Years," "Ballad of Johnny O'Brien," "All I Have to Do," "God Bless the Boston Red Sox," "Don't I Know You," "Brotherhood of Bastards," "Rooters' Song," "Maybe You're an Angel," "Daisy Darling Why," "Do or Die," "Color Me Blue," "As Long As There's a Chance," "Not Rivera," "One More Run," "Daisy's Letter," "Worcester Boosters Fight Song," "Circle in a

Diamond,” “Free Country,” “Mr. Yawkey Has a Vision,” “See You in the Big Leagues,” “Errors,” “The Game of Baseball.”

Sets, Scott Pask; costumes, Michael McDonald; lighting, Donald Holder; sound, Acme Sound Partners; choreography, Peter Pucci; musical arrangements, Bruce Coughlin; vocal arrangements and music direction, Wendy Bobbitt Cavett; production stage manager, Chris De Camillis; stage manager, Katherine Shea. Opened and reviewed June 2, 2010. Runs through June 27. Running time: 2 HOURS 20 MIN.

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