

Laura Collins-Hughes | Theater Review

Meeting Cute, Toting Baggage

An effervescent musical delivers lavishly on the promise of a rom-com.

DOUGAL TODD doesn't exactly scream rom-com hero. He isn't rich and lonesome, or arrogant but tamable, or devastatingly handsome yet stubbornly unattached. At 25, he's a goofball British tourist and first-time visitor to New York — cheerfully broke, entirely unworldly and steeped in jumbled cinematic notions of the city from the far too many movies he's watched.

Falling in love, in any case, is not on Dougal's agenda. When he gets off the plane at Kennedy International Airport, the person he yearns to see is his father, Mark. The man ditched him and his mother before Dougal was born, made a fortune across the Atlantic and never bothered to meet his son, but Dougal holds no grudge. Mark is getting married this weekend, and Dougal is invited: His big chance has arrived at long last.

"I just wondered — is he here?" Dougal asks Robin Rainey, the no-nonsense New Yorker sent to collect him at J.F.K., and the tender hope in his question is enough to crack a heart. Not Robin's, mind you — hers is very well defended — but audience members' for sure. Though because she is beautiful and single, this is a rom-com and Dougal is in fact its hero, probably hers as well, eventually. He has two whole days to try.

The effervescent new musical comedy "Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)," which opened on Thursday at the Longacre Theater, is the most charmingly simple show on Broadway right now — a stellar debut for its authors, Jim Barne and Kit Buchan, and the actor Sam Tutty, who plays the irrepressible Dougal. Transferred from London's West End by way of Cambridge, Mass., this twinkly two-hander delivers lavishly on the promise of a rom-com: laughter, escape and fantasy.

Directed by Tim Jackson, this well-honed production also taps into our brains theatrically, with its clever pop score and a cityscape that is more suggested than realized. While Soutra Gilmour's ingenious set opens up like a jewelry box to reveal bits and pieces of scenery — a coffee shop counter here, a hotel room bed there — it is mostly a landscape built of luggage. Or, to take a hint from the sign hanging overhead as Dougal and Robin first meet, baggage. These two are toting some serious emotional baggage, his soft-sided, hers hard-shelled.

Robin (Christiani Pitts, well matched with Tutty) is the younger sister of Mark's 30-year-old bride-to-be, Melissa. With the ceremony looming, Melissa's wishes are Robin's commands, so she races across the boroughs, getting errands done. Shepherding Dougal to his hotel in Chinatown is one of them; hanging out with him is not, no matter how bouncing-off-walls eager he is to do the things he's sure New Yorkers do constantly: grab a hot dog, go ice skating, pop by the Statue of Liberty.

"Yeah," Robin tells Melissa the next morning by phone, "he's incredibly extra. Kind of like a golden retriever but, actually less boundaried."

When Robin's next job is to head to Flat-



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bush, Brooklyn, and collect the wedding cake, who's going to tell the golden retriever he can't tag along? She relents, they head off, and while they're on the subway he calls her Auntie Robin with a completely straight face. Mortifying to her — she is all of 26 — but adorable to us.

The show's title notwithstanding, cake transport is not the main task of their time together. It is, however, the task that allows them to begin to bond, when Dougal turns out to be surprisingly savvy at helping Robin send a message to a hot guy on Tinder. That bond grows when they accidentally bungle the cake assignment.

As gleefully as the musical follows the formula of the rom-com genre, it also has a welcome comfort with ambiguity and, stashed up its sleeve, some psychological bombs. The action floats along so comfortably, both in and out of song, that it seems odd to interrupt that momentum with an intermission. But the second act brings a

stark shift in tone, getting darker for a while before rebounding with great silliness and gratifying sympathy.

"Two Strangers" is more Dougal's story than Robin's, and I don't think that's deliberate. Barne and Buchan mean to write her with some depth, and certainly the excellent Pitts plays her that way. Still, Robin's context is less filled out than Dougal's: the melancholy stuckness of her life; the painful, smoothed-over rift with her sister; a particularly mystifying distance from the grandmother she loves, which I didn't buy.

But sweet, resilient, puppyish Dougal, who is pals with his mother, and says she's "never had a bitter word" to utter about his dad — this willfully happy dreamer is quite a creation. Tutty has played Dougal since the play's premiere in London in 2023, and his performance is so deep, so delicate, so whole that you'd be mad not to let it seduce you. New though Tutty is to New York, let's hope he won't be a stranger.

Above and left, Sam Tutty and Christiani Pitts star in the musical "Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)."

Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)
At the Longacre Theater in Manhattan; twostrangersmusical.com. Running time: 2 hours 15 minutes.

