

Limelight

9 to 5 the Musical (Sydney)

The plot may be simplistic and cartoon-like but it's a feel-good musical with an important message, and the Australian cast delivers it in style.

3.5 stars

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by Jo Litson on 25 February, 2022

Mention *9 to 5* and ten to one the first name that pops into people's heads is Dolly Parton. She did, after all, write the bouncy theme song *9 to 5* for the 1980 film, in which she played Doralee Rhodes, secretary to the appalling, sexist company CEO Frank Hart Jnr.

9 to 5 the Musical, based on the film, has even more to do with Dolly Parton, featuring as it does a score of original songs (alongside *9 to 5*) for which she has written the music.



Eddie Perfect and Erin Clare in *9 to 5 the Musical*. Photo © David Hooley

What's more, Parton puts in an appearance – on screen. She gets things going with a pre-recorded welcome at the top of the show, in which she introduces the characters, and also appears at the finale to tell us where all the characters end up. There's no doubt that her chirpy chat to the audience adds another little feel-good nugget to the piece.

As you'd expect, the musical opens with the song *9 to 5*, which immediately has the audience bopping. Not all the other numbers are as infectious as that, but there are some terrific songs, which drew

roars of approval on opening night thanks to their drop-dead brilliant delivery by the leading ladies of the Australian cast.

The musical, which features lyrics and book by Patricia Resnick, who co-wrote the screenplay for the movie, premiered in Los Angeles in 2008 before opening on Broadway in 2009. Jeff Calhoun took over as director for the 2010 US tour and reworked the show. In 2019, he directed a revamped version in the West End, which is the production we are seeing here.

The plot sticks pretty closely to the film. It's the first day of work at Consolidated Industries for former housewife Judy Bernly (Casey Donovan), whose husband Dick (Joshua Mulheran) has left her for his secretary. Violet Newstead (Marina Prior), the savvy, efficient manager, who clearly deserves promotion but keeps getting overlooked in favour of young men she has trained, takes the overwhelmed, inexperienced Judy under her wing.

Meanwhile, everyone shuns the happily married Doralee (a character clearly based on Parton herself, played here by Erin Clare) since her lecherous boss Franklin Hart Jr. ([Eddie Perfect](#)) has falsely claimed he is having an affair with her.



Erin Clare, Marina Prior and Casey Donovan in *9 to 5 the Musical*. Photo © David Hooley

To cut a somewhat silly (but fun) story short, the three women become friends and decide to take revenge on Hart. They kidnap him and tie him up in his home, while they work wonders at the office by introducing equal pay for men and women, and an on-site childcare centre, among various other measures that make the workers feel valued.

It's a simplistic, cartoon-like plot that wears its heart on its sleeve and trumpets its feminist message loud and clear – but it's an important message that sadly still feels relevant.

Though set in the 1980s, the show still feels a bit dated, given the huge changes that have occurred since the MeToo movement. There are naff, sexist jokes from Hart (fair enough), but you also have Judy saying, "I still miss Dick". When Violet sings her big number *One of the Boys*, the lyrics include lines like "I'm everyone's new pinup girl.... This old gal is one of the boys" – which would doubtless be differently phrased if it was written now.

That said, there are some very funny lines in the script, and when Violet delivers her speech about why women need to be treated like people and paid the same as men, the young women in the audience were cheering: times haven't changed enough and the issues still need addressing.

After getting off to a rollicking start with *9 to 5*, the first act feels a bit slow at times as the plot is established, despite the seamless set changes and the energetic, sharp choreography by Lisa Stevens. But the shorter second act really flies, picking you up in its feel-good embrace.

All the performances by the leading ladies hit their mark. Marina Prior exudes Violet's sassy, no-nonsense efficiency, and anchors the show with effortless ease, bringing the house down with her number *One of the Boys*. Erin Clare is loveable and suitably gorgeous as the smart, voluptuous Doralee, who urges everyone not to judge a book by its cover, and captures Parton's country tones beautifully in her song *Backwoods Barbie*.

Casey Donovan's acting continues to develop, while her voice is a glorious instrument. She stops the show with *Get Out and Stay Out*, moving from a soft whisper to a full-throttle belt, delivered with passion, heart and soul – so much so that the opening night audience stood.



Caroline O'Connor and Eddie Perfect in *9 to 5 the Musical*. Photo © David Hooley

Caroline O'Connor plays Hart's loyal administrative assistant Roz Keith – a pompous, interfering busy-body, who is obsessed with memos and even more obsessed with Hart for whom she nurses unrequited love. When she fantasises about Hart in her song *Heart to Heart*, revealing her steamy passion, she nails every word and move, playing it to the hilt, also to the approval from the crowd.

Eddie Perfect could find a slightly more dastardly yet charming edge as the villainous, sexist Hart, but gives a solid performance with more than a touch of Trump to it, while Ethan Jones is winning as Joe, the young man who is sweet on Violet – a tricky role as Joe persists in wooing Violet, even when she says no, but Jones manages to get the balance right. The ensemble performs with energy and commitment, ever on the move.

The flexible set design and costumes by Tom Rogers reflect the plot trajectory, becoming ever more colourful as the three women run the company, adding to the fun. The sound balance, however, wasn't quite right, particularly in the first act when it was often hard to hear the lyrics and the harmonies in the songs, but improved in the second act.

Overall, *9 to 5* is a really enjoyable night out. The plot may be paper-thin, some of the lines dated and some of the humour questionable, but by the time the show has zipped to its finale, you don't really mind. It's a night of escapist, feel-good fun with a serious message that still needs reiterating – and this cast does it in style.

***9 to 5 the Musical* plays at Sydney's Capitol Theatre until 8 May, then at the Lyric Theatre, QPAC from 22 May, and Arts Centre Melbourne from 10 July.**