

9 to 5: The Musical review – Dolly Parton show is saved by standout female leads

Cassie Tongue

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Casey Donovan, Marina Prior, Caroline O'Connor and Erin Clare star in 9-to-5: the Musical. Photograph: David Hooley

Capitol theatre, Sydney

Based on the 1980 film, the adaptation is full of frustrating contradictions. But with outstanding performances, you'll leave with a smile

9 to 5: The Musical is a contradiction.

Based on the beloved 1980 film which starred [Dolly Parton](#), Lily Tomlin and Jane Fonda, the stage show – which premiered in 2008, and opened in Sydney on Thursday – is a newer version of the workplace revenge comedy. It's packed full of new songs (by Parton) and features a reworked script, but it can't trust itself enough to leave behind its legacy, looping in pre-recorded video messages from the universally beloved Parton to set up the story and even sing along.

Still set in the 1980s, the story (adapted for the stage by original screenwriter Patricia Resnick) remains the same: three secretaries (played in the Australian premiere by Marina Prior, Erin Clare and Casey Donovan) band together after a series of injustices – and an accidental act of retribution – to take down their sexist boss, Franklin Hart Jr (Eddie Perfect). While he is indisposed, the trio run the company with working conditions that in 2022 still remain a fantasy for most women: job flexibility, free health care, free day care and equal pay.



Erin Clare as Doralee, Marina Prior as Violet and Casey Donovan as Judy. Photograph: David Hooley

Back to the contradictions: the show encourages us through explicit lyrics to resist the urge to judge a woman's value based on her looks, but also makes Roz (Caroline O'Connor) the butt of the joke for her supposed undesirable appearance. It supports the empowerment of women, but reduces its supporting female characters to unflattering and often deferential stereotypes.

And while it is all about women reclaiming power by raising their voices, the sound design buries their lyrics, and their top notes, in the mix.

Plus, even when the men in the show are supposed to be unpleasant corporate-bros to be laughed at, they're prominently portrayed with sympathy. As the leader of the male pack, it's faintly embarrassing every time Perfect appears onstage, playing a truly horrifying boss like it's endearing. This "ain't I a stinker?" approach falls flat every time.

A final contradiction: based on the above, the production should be charmless.

It isn't.

In a testament to the power of smart casting, this production of *9 to 5* often rises above the sum of its parts due to the power of its three leads – and a secret weapon, O'Connor, in a should-be thankless role.

Stage veteran Marina Prior's acting chops are often overlooked in musicals, but her sharp instincts and keen comic timing are in fine form here as Violet (the Tomlin role): the brilliant but often-overlooked supervisor who is denied a promotion in favour of a much younger and less-experienced man. Her wryness and grit ground the action as it veers into the ridiculous.



'When Doralee corners Hart, it's almost as cathartic for us as it is for her': Eddie Perfect and Erin Clare. Photograph: David Hooley

Rising star Erin Clare steps into Parton's shoes as Doralee Rhodes, a Southern secretary who is sexually harassed by the boss and ostracised by the other women on-staff, who believe she's having an affair with him. She comes alive as resident firecracker, channelling her anger into glorious retribution. When she corners Hart, ties him up on the sofa and gives him a piece of her mind, it's almost as cathartic for us as it is for her.

Bringing the essential but never overly sentimental sweetness is Casey Donovan as Judy Bernley (the Fonda role), a woman entering the workforce for the first time after the end of her marriage. The most successful and thoughtful arc of the show might be her growth in confidence, as she finds community and allyship with Violet and Doralee. Donovan's powerhouse voice is in fine form in the second-act number in which she finally steps into her power against the men who have hurt her; she earned a spontaneous standing ovation from much of the audience.



Caroline O'Connor is 'sublime' as Roz. Photograph: David Hooley

As a trio, the women are unstoppable. In the most preposterous scenes, they build upon each other's performances beat for beat; their growing friendship feels surprisingly authentic, if, as in all musicals, necessarily accelerated and exaggerated.

And then there's Caroline O'Connor. Roz is so in love with and loyal to Hart that she sells out other women, endorses his misogyny, and even sniffs his scent from his office chair. As a character, Roz undermines the entire premise of the show; her solo number Heart to Hart is essentially an extended joke about a woman who is deemed to be unattractive daring to have sexual desires. But O'Connor almost transcends it all. With her towering voice and loose-limbed slapstick comedy colliding with a genuine peacocking sensuality, she refuses to let Roz be an audience punchline: she makes the number hot, and she makes Roz matter.

Until Hart confronts her at the end of the song. He's disgusted by her and her sexuality – and while he's a pig in that moment, he's also partly an audience surrogate; we're supposed to laugh at her, too. It's the one sour note that even the sublime O'Connor cannot overcome.

And yet the four women are magic, delivering the show's most basic takes on feminism – for equal pay, for equal rights – with a twinkle in the eye for the women watching, earning full-throated cheers.

Hilariously, a man in the audience disapproved. He shushed a cheering group of women sitting by me; one of them turned to him, and in the spirit of the show, informed him with utter disdain that *they were allowed to laugh*. The show has its faults, but with its perfectly cast women – grinning conspiratorially and singing with breathtaking conviction – it will leave you with a smile.

- *9 to 5: the Musical* runs at Capitol theatre, Sydney until 1 May; it then tours to Brisbane and Melbourne