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## First-class tunes to tap your toes to

Ismene Brown reviews *On Your Toes* at The Leicester Haymarket

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**Ismene Brown**

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"IT'S got to be love / It couldn't be tonsillitis . . ." Sometimes a crazy lyric and a twiddly tune fit together with such inspired rhythm that you can't get it out of your head. There are a wonderful number of those in *On Your Toes*, a nutty 1936 Broadway musical by Rodgers and Hart that is rarely performed now, for various compelling reasons.

First, in those days they didn't need a plot, only some characters and a dozen songs - unless you call some eyewash about a New York music professor accidentally starring with a Russian ballet troupe while Mafia assassins hunt him down a story. Second, Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* is the butt of its mockery, and George Balanchine of the *Ballets Russes* was the original choreographer, which sets a daunting yardstick for any new choreographer. Third, the central role demands that very rare creature, a ballerina whose dramatic and vocal presence is as mesmerising as her physical grace. No wonder the last revival was nearly 20 years ago, when the sublime Natalia Makarova, with her gazelle body and leopard voice, played Vera Baronova.

The Leicester Haymarket's new production of *On Your Toes* is headlined by its leading man instead - Adam Cooper. He has both re-choreographed it and stars in it as Junior Dolan, the former Broadway hooper who has fled to academe. Cooper could act a little more forcefully, but he sings decently, looks sumptuously handsome (a blond in horn-rims and fawn lounge suit - half Jude Law, half young Robert Redford), and tap-dances with Astaire-like delicacy.

Whether it is tap or tutus, Cooper comes pretty good as a dance-maker too. He looks overstretched by the final ballet-within-the-show, but the big title number, *On Your Toes*, is a whirl of clattering music students and pirouetting ballet-dancers that is dynamic, joyful and exciting.

He is fetchingly supported by Irek Mukhamedov, who brings witty personality and authentic Russianess to the combustible Konstantine, the Russian Ballet's randy principal man, as well as some awe-inspiring physicality to the ballet numbers.

Against this tough male team, the former Royal Ballet principal Marguerite Porter - while exquisitely beautiful and sartorially daring - is too lightweight for Vera Baronova, which undermines the show's touring prospects. She is also outshone by the assured

musical theatre talents of Linzi Hateley as the ingenue and, most of all, Kathryn Evans (a former Evita) as the wisecracking ballet patron, Peggy Porterfield, whose unexpectedly erotic tango with Cooper is a highlight.

Songs and dialogue need tighter delivery, and the corps de ballet would not have got within miles of the real Diaghilev. All the same, design, lighting and musical direction are sharp, and this is a very stylish presentation of a most entertaining musical. Bravo Leicester.

- Until May 25. Tickets: 0116 253 9797



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