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Six by Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss (review)

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PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

Patrick Maley, Editor

SIX. By Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss. Directed by Lucy Moss and Jamie Armitage. Brooks Atkinson Theatre, New York City. October 9, 2021.

In a theatrical landscape regularly awash with jukebox musicals that cull the catalogs of big-name pop artists such as ABBA, Alanis Morissette, Gloria Estefan, the Go-Gos, and more, Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss's *Six* arrived on Broadway with an original score of radio-friendly hooks, TikTok-ready dance moves, and a racially diverse cast of tabloid-worthy divas that gave legitimate pop stars a run for their money. The musical's selling point is that its supersonic score takes inspiration from King Henry VIII's six wives as much as it does the pop sirens of the last twenty years. This dynamic combination gave the audience the chance to veer from silently thanking their high school history teachers for giving them the ability to laugh at puns about the Protestant Reformation to priding themselves for recognizing choreography indebted to Beyoncé's "Formation." By amalgamating the academic humor of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* with the rhetoric of superficial third-wave feminist pop stars, *Six* created a frothy but provocative musical that offered bespoke narratives for sixteenth-century women whose travails are all the more relevant in the #MeToo era. Whether on London's West End or the various cruise ships where *Six* was staged before it debuted on Broadway, its creators proved that they found a formula that caters to an audience of pop music-loving millennials and Generation Zers who, in a post-Madonna cultural landscape, are liable to see Catherine of Aragon, Gloria Steinem, and Selena Gomez as equals in the feminist canon.

Like a Black Pink music video, *Six*'s plot was threadbare but straightforward enough: the women form a girl group and each one is competing to become the sextet's lead singer. The sole criterion for becoming the leader is winning the audience's

applause by proving they suffered the most during their marriage to King Henry VIII. The competition format is more akin to the messy politics of twenty-first-century reality TV shows that pit women against one another rather than the sororal communities portrayed in actual early modern literary works such as Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* (1405), María de Zayas's *Desenagños amorosos* (1647), and Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* (1688). The show's earnest though superficial take on feminist discourse attempts to mirror Zayas's work wherein a safe space is created for women to be candid about the ways in which men belittle, deceive, and murder them without repercussions in a patriarchal society.

Six's opening number, "Ex-Wives," encapsulates how the show borrows from the historical lore of England, Broadway, and pop music. Each character is given a verse to flesh out the details of the dreary-but-catchy refrain of "divorced, beheaded, died / divorced, beheaded, survived" à la the imprisoned women of *Chicago* in "Cell Block Tango." But unlike the "merry murderesses of the Cook County Jail," these women were unable to exact revenge on their husband.

Catherine of Aragon's (Adrianna Hicks) stature as a regal Queen Bee was solidified with its keen homage to Beyoncé at her peak with the fist-pumping "No Way." But more could have been made of how Earth-shattering her divorce was. As the daughter of Europe's most powerful royals, Spain's Catholic monarchs Fernando and Isabel, Catherine was a queen among queens. Her fierce devotion to the Roman Catholic Church and twenty-four-year marriage to the king proved her as a loyal steward of traditional monarchies. Henry's divorce from Catherine ensured that England, Europe, and the world would never be the same as the Reformation ushered in religious wars, geopolitical standoffs, and a refreshing stream of liberal intellectual discourse.

Anne Boleyn, played by the addictively charming Andrea Macasaet, garnered hearty laughter every



Abby Mueller (Jane Seymour), Samantha Pauly (Katherine Howard), Adrianna Hicks (Catherine of Aragon), Andrea Macasaet (Anne Boleyn), Brittney Mack (Anna of Cleves), and Anna Uzele (Catherine Parr) (l-r) in *Six*. (Photo: Joan Marcus.)

time she reminded the other wives and audience about the horrors of being beheaded. Lily Allen-esque lines such as “The rules were so outdated / Us two wanted to get X-rated / Soon, ex-communicated / Everybody chill, its totes God’s will” captured the way the show ping-ponged between historical narratives and bubbly effervescence. But the audience’s laughter belied the fact that if we remove ourselves from the historical context of the English king’s “divine right” to order the execution of his second and fifth wives, we are hearing from a woman who, simply put, was murdered at the behest of her husband. Domestic abuse does not usually make for comedy, but, removed by time and space, the dark humor worked.

Jane Seymour’s (Abby Mueller) sub-par Adele-inspired torch song “Heart of Stone” attempted to imbue the king with empathy. But the historical context made it difficult to do so. Henry never bothered to give Seymour a coronation, and most historians consider the king’s public claims of affection for her mere pretense, given that she died soon after the birth of the king’s coveted male heir, Edward VI. The song’s portrayal of unwavering loyalty to a man who had already proved himself to be deceitful did not bode well for the show’s feminist goals.

The job of bringing gravitas to the glitzy spectacle fell on Catherine Parr (Anna Uzele), the king’s final wife. Parr initially refused to partake in the competition after explaining how saddened she has become after hearing the women compete among themselves about who suffered the most miscarriages. Her homily humbled the women into forgoing the competition. But the show must go on, and so Catherine delivered the self-affirming mid-tempo number “I Don’t Need Your Love” in the spirit of Alicia Keys. As her torch song indexes her successes as a writer, an advocate for women’s literacy, and a patron of female artists, Catherine underscored the importance of championing women’s accomplishments outside of their roles as lovers, wives, and mothers.

But was it enough? We had just witnessed the lives of six wronged women treated as catchy bops. Was simply giving them a stage to tell their story sufficient? Ironically, the musical, which clocks in at eighty minutes with fifteen minutes to spare after Catherine’s ballad, did not give the audience time to contemplate such issues. And so the guitar growled, the 808-drumbeat flared, and the lights and confetti pummeled the audience for not one but two rounds of encores. Like the *Mamma Mia!* feel-good disco party you never want to leave and

the *On Your Feet!* Gloria Estefan–impersonator concert you want to keep congaing in the aisle to, *Six* simply gave the audience time to dance and cheer on its cast of wronged women.

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SLOPPY BONNIE: A ROADKILL MUSICAL FOR THE MODERN CHICK. By Krista Knight and Barry Brinegar. Directed by Leah Lowe. OZ Arts Nashville, in association with Vanderbilt University Theatre, Nashville. May 28, 2021.

In Krista Knight and Barry Brinegar's *Sloppy Bonnie: A Roadkill Musical for the Modern Chick*, our hapless heroine, Bonnie, née Bonita, aka Sloppy Bonnie when she is drunk, proudly declares herself a "basic" Southern girl from small-town Tennessee. She sports a midriff-bearing gingham shirt, a handkerchief-sized denim skirt, glossy white go-go boots, fire-engine red lipstick, and eyelashes observable from outer space. She guzzles pumpkin spice lattes and gushes about her recent engagement to youth-pastor-in-training Jedidiah. Bonnie is, according to one of Knight's rapier stage directions, "almost hysterical for the patriarchy," and her hyperfeminine drag is reminiscent of John Waters and Charles Busch. The creative team for *Bonnie*, like their stylistic predecessors, embraced the lowbrow and rendered zaniness with architectural precision. This production's commitment to camp was so assiduous, in fact, that the action seemed to depart this plane entirely and land firmly in the realm of the uncanny. Bonnie frightens us because we recognize her. But this very recognizability, this *basic-ness*, is so exaggerated that it twists into something alien. Leah Lowe's direction gleefully interrogated Bonnie's feminine uncanny, throwing into stark relief the strange specificity of white suburban womanhood, the mythology of the open road, and the hauntedness of the US-American South.

Intensifying the production's recognizable-yet-alien vibe was the serendipity of its timing: OZ Arts premiered the play during the post-jab, pre-Delta reprieve of mid-2021. Staged in the venue's parking lot, the show beckoned us across the concrete with a kitschy invitation: a vintage pink Chevy, owned by the playwright herself, sat house left, marking the defiant reemergence of theatre. Nashville-cool bartenders proffered canned cocktails and out-of-practice theatregoers made small talk, straining to be heard over the stentorian copulation of frogs. Did

that late May evening signify a return to the Before Times? Not quite. Did it mark the beginning of After? No, not that either. To quote Derrida quoting Hamlet: "Time [was] out of joint."

Knight, who is also a screenwriter, has constructed a script full of pleasingly self-aware Hollywood beats. Our protagonist faces a major obstacle (her fiancé has abandoned her for pastoral obligations) and unequivocally states her goal: "I AM GOING to Camp New Life Bay Retreat on Shotgun Mountain to surprise my fiancé Jedidiah." Co-opting the structure of a road-trip movie, Knight shorthands her way through the familiar and ends up landing on something much stranger than we were expecting. Bonnie, you see, is not really a human; she is a chicken. Well, she is half-chicken, half-woman. We come to realize that we are not simply watching a lovestruck damsel fumbling her way along the backroads. What we are seeing is a ghostly origin story, a folktale of betrayal and transmutation. The Chicken Woman, the play suggests, roams the hills of Tennessee to this very day, and we have gathered here in this parking lot to discover how the galline specter came to be.

Bonnie sets off on her journey with the perfect road-trip companion: the Son of God Himself. The duo belts out Brinegar's Dolly Partonesque bop, "Jesus Riding Shotgun, Bonnie at the Wheel." Bonnie croons, "With his hand hung out his window / Lettin' air blow through his nail hole." Knight's lyrics revel in sacrilege, although Bonnie herself is a believer. She waxes earnestly about her devotion to "sweet baby Jesus" and recalls her first childhood Christmas pageant, in which she portrayed the Nativity Chicken. It is the origin story behind the origin story; the tale of the Chicken Woman, it seems, has Judeo-Christian roots. The twisted cosmivision of *Sloppy Bonnie* is a funhouse mirror of



Jesus accompanies Bonnie on her journey to Shotgun Mountain. James Rudolph II and Amanda Disney in *Sloppy Bonnie*. (Photo: Tiffany Bessire, courtesy of OZ Arts Nashville.)