

This excerpt is adapted from a critique that compares the movie-musical Newsies (1992) with a production of its stage show of the same name.

'Extra ! Extra ! Read All About It': "Newsies" Makes Media History Soar

by Bruce Chadwick

Bruce Chadwick lectures on history and film at Rutgers University in New Jersey. He also teaches writing at New Jersey City University. He holds his PhD from Rutgers and was a former editor for the New York Daily News.

Newsies: the Musical

Paper Mill Playhouse: 2011-2012 Season

Millburn, N.J.

The Disney 1992 movie *Newsies* was one of the most boring films I have ever seen... It was the story of the 1899 newsboy strike against New York's biggest and most powerful newspapers, set to music...

Now, nearly two decades later, the Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey has brought the awful movie back as a stage musical. Now, amazingly, it's just wonderful. *Newsies: the Musical* is not only a splendid show, but a marvelous look at raucous media history just before the turn of the century, when it was being written by unforgettable media moguls such as Joseph Pulitzer Jr. and William Randolph Hearst.

How did *Newsies* resurrect itself so magnificently? First, Harvey Fierstein has written a new book that is 100 percent better than the old one. The 1992 movie was pure Disney sap. The newsboys joke and dance their way through a two hour story, totally isolated from everybody else who lives in New York City. The entire film was sanitized. You know the boys are going to win the strike because this is a Disney movie. The acting was atrocious; at times you even cheered for the police to stop the kids from singing any more.

Fierstein has made *Newsies* a dramatic, tension-filled story. You don't think the boys are going to win the strike. In fact, they look like they are going to lose it. The kids are very realistic and they have both professional and personal problems. Fierstein has made the newsboys, and publisher Joseph Pulitzer, very believable and jarring historical figures. This is a rough, tough, streets of New York, circa 1899 and the people in the show clash hard with each other. It is now a terrific story...

Historically, the musical is very accurate. It carefully chronicles the two-week-long 1899 newsboy (the kids were aged about 10 to 17) strike against the papers of Pulitzer, Hearst and others. The publishers increased the cost of newspapers to the independent newsboys, who stood on street corners and sold them, shouting out the edition's headlines as loud as they could over the din of congested street traffic in New York. There were more than 10,000 newsboys in the city at the turn of the century. [After the war ended] the newsboys refused to pay the increased price and went on strike for the first time ever. The kids formed a union, rounded up thousands of members, held meetings and staged outdoor rallies. The publishing moguls used goons, newspaper workers, the police and city hall to crush them. The city was fascinated by it all.

It was a time, too, that saw one of the great circulation wars in media history. Technology permitted newspapers to print far more papers than ever. The political parties that had owned or dominated newspapers for nearly 100 years had been forced out by independent publishers. This meant larger, better newspapers, but also papers driven by sensational news to drive up sales.

The story covers a lot of true historical ground. We learn much about publishing, how newsboys worked and lived, the press circulation wars of the era, the 1890s economic depression, tenement housing and labor strife. It discusses the other industries in the country that hired children, as did the press, and the horrific lives of those children. You learn about the workings of city hall, brash, tough talking Governor Theodore Roosevelt and marvel at the kids as they produce their own strike newspapers and stage massive rallies...

As the dialogue and song lyrics say, the newsboy strike was not just a bunch of kids versus some newspaper moguls over a ten-cent price increase. It was a strike to end the child labor atrocities that plagued America in that era, a strike to give the growing labor movement real strength and a strike to mobilize the people of New York behind a bunch of kids in a war against the most powerful men in America.

'Extra ! Extra ! read all about it'—*Newsies* is a huge hit and a wonderful trip through U.S. media history...

Bruce Chadwick can be reached at bchadwick@njcu.edu,