

BIG HAIR, BIGGER HEART

CYNDI LAUPER IGNITES A 'WORKING GIRL' REVIVAL — AND WE ARE HERE FOR IT

The 1988 film gets an onstage remake thanks to the Eighties hitmaker and a stellar ensemble led by JoJo

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Joanna “JoJo” Levesque (center) with cast members in La Jolla Playhouse’s ‘Working Girl.’ Rich Soublet II

The big hair. The shoulder pads. The misogynistic boss trying to look up your skirt. For all these reasons and more, the Mike Nichols-directed *Working Girl*, landing 18 years before the [#metoo](#) movement, was always bound for a [musical](#) — with its relatability, unfortunately, spanning generations. The revival, currently showing at the La Jolla Playhouse, reworks the original while embracing its relentless optimism, and is powered by the lyrical maestro herself, [Cyndi Lauper](#), and Christopher Ashley, who helmed the on-stage ensemble.

While the play keeps things smartly in the Eighties, the most noticeable change is the cohort of fast-talking girlfriends who are ready to help Tess McGill through the trials and tribulations of a man’s world and corporate America. In the 1988 film — which also got a short-lived shot as an NBC TV series — we see Tess, played by the brilliant Melanie Griffith, quit her job after her sleazy coworkers and boss humiliate her, and then transfer to mergers and acquisitions at a new firm where her new boss turns out to be a woman, Katharine Parker (Sigourney Weaver). Before Tess has time to hurrah, however, Katharine is stabbing her in the back, and Tess dabbles in a bit of identity theft with the help of another firm’s handsome associate, Jack Trainer (Harrison Ford), to convince the head honcho at Trask Industries to buy into her sharp idea of investing in radio. Let the games begin!

The musical keeps the aforementioned plot, but instead of just Tess and Jack at the heart of the story, a thrilling group of her female colleagues shows up for the team effort. The audience gets the pleasure of standout performances by Ashley Blanchet — who steps in for the role of Cyn, Tess’s best friend — along with lovable moments by Amy Hillner Larsen, Syndi Moon, and Jacqueline B. Arnold. The film’s scene where Tess and Cyn go through Katherine’s wardrobe transforms into a fantastic runway affair where Tess and her friends catwalk in full Eighties flair — donning sparkling designer gowns and belting out Lauper’s “Notice the Woman.”

Tess, now embodied by Joanna “JoJo” Levesque (of “Too Little Too Late” fame), is also joined by her squad during her initial meeting with Jack (Anoop Desai stepping in for Ford) as they scheme at a work function and crash a wedding for Mr. Trask’s daughter. While the running around and antics make for great comedy and inject this version with frenetic energy, it at times feels crowded and can benefit from tightening up the script. Still, the play is better for it, adding the kind of camp a Broadway hopeful deserves. The cutaways to Katharine are a delicious example of this: veteran Leslie Rodriguez Kritzer plays the bedridden exec after a ski accident lands her in the hospital, melding kooky and cutthroat as she calls in while her assistant runs amok at her firm.

And while Levesque and Desai emit the kind of longing chemistry the theater loves to see, the musical replaces romance with the bond between best friends at the heart of the story. When Tess realizes her ambitions to break the proverbial glass ceiling have left Cyn behind, the two recollect themselves to remember the heart of the matter and duet the heartfelt “You and Me.” It’s moments like this where Lauper’s ear for hit tracks flex, where many of this modern day *Working Girl* echoes the echelons of Eighties chart-toppers — including the “Get You Hot” number laid out by Tess’ (ex) boyfriend, Mick (Joey Tanato) and soaring opener “Something More.”

The musical numbers fuel the revamped script, centering sisterhood firmly in this renewed storyline. Lauper, who was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame this year, recently [told *Rolling Stone*](#), “I still think rock & roll can save the world,” adding, “I thought about all of the women who were inducted before me, and all the shoulders that I stand on, but all the women coming up who stand on my shoulders. It’s wonderful to be part of that legacy.”

Lauper’s words resound in one of the play’s final scenes, when Tess rises triumphant and brings her friends for the ride to the top. As *Working Girl* concludes with men and women alike declaring they are a “working girl” side-by-side, it all seems too good to be true — an aspirational conclusion of what America can, and should, be. But who knows? Crazier things have happened in the last decade, and like Katharine (albeit bitterly) says to Tess as she saunters off, let’s see how things shake out in another 50 years. We’ve got just over another decade to go.