

## Last Weekend to See CATCO's Daddy Long Legs



Joe Bishara and Candice Kight perform in CATCO's production of *Daddy Long Legs*. Photo by DeBlasio Photography.



**Richard Sanford**

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There's a long, storied tradition in Western literature of "aging millionaire seduces young orphan through varied means, including deceit." Probably the most well-known in music theatre circles is Lerner and Lowe's adaptation of the Colette novel *Cigi*. Just in time for Valentine's Day, CATCO is mounting Paul Gordon (music and lyrics) and John Caird's (book) Off-Broadway adaptation of Jean Webster's *Daddy Long Legs* in a production directed by Steven C. Anderson.





*DeBlasio Photography.*

*Daddy Long Legs* was a best-selling epistolary novel in 1912 and has spawned many adaptations in the ensuing century including movies with Mary Pickford and Shirley Temple and even two *anime*. Most famous these days is the 1955 film with Fred Astaire and Leslie Caron. The Gordon and Caird musical cuts the age difference down from the 32-year span between Astaire and Caron and includes a lot of references to the benefactor being “not even old” but otherwise knocks no dust off the tale it tells.

The Gordon and Caird musical distills its milieu of turn-of-the-last-century New York, orphanage, and college, to its two principal characters. Jervis Pendleton (Joe Bishara) is a trustee of the John Grier Home, an orphanage. He chooses one student every year to furnish with a college education. In 1908, he chooses Jerusha Abbott (Candice Kight), the first girl chosen for this program based on the talent shown in her essays. The musical follows their correspondence through her college as Jervis finds himself infatuated with Jerusha. This includes meeting her in his own guise as the uncle of her classmate without telling her he’s the mystery benefactor she dubbed “Daddy Long Legs” for his height when she glimpsed him in silhouette; he even plays her against herself answering letters from both characters.

The songs here are too-often anonymous, pounding themes into our heads until they’re an indistinct blur. However, each song is square in the sweet spot of Bishara and Kight and the two voices sound beautiful together. Those glittering harmonies are buoyed by the luminous musical accompaniment of music director Samuel Clein on piano and Sarah Troeller, a cellist who impressed me greatly. The sweetness of the music isn’t quite enough to get past lyrical potholes like a song about “Charity” where Pendleton seems to decide that all charity is a waste because people can’t be grateful in pleasing enough ways.

Steven Anderson does a fantastic job keeping the audience’s attention on these two actors and uses every inch of Brad Steinmetz’s well-crafted set. But at two hours and fifteen minutes with an intermission, it’s hard to ignore how thin the material is. There just isn’t enough *there*. Kight does a fantastic job showing Jerusha come of age, her evolution is palpable and easy to root for. Bishara does a fine, workmanlike job, within the boundaries he has to navigate. His Pendleton isn’t easy to root for in this day and age and isn’t developed enough to be a complex psychological character. When he’s not singing, the character’s indistinct edges are hard to ignore.

This is an immaculate production of a story that hasn’t aged well. Only recommended for big fans of the Jean Webster original, the writing team of Paul Gordon and John Caird, or fans of this specific bygone-age throwback.

*Daddy Long Legs runs through February 18 with shows at 11:00 a.m. Wednesday, 8:00 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, and 2:00 p.m. Sunday. For tickets and more info, visit [catco.org](http://catco.org).*



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