

# Five Points Neighborhood Under Siege, Doo-da, Doo-da

“Gangs of New York” may have helped to revive the memory of Five Points, the notorious 19th-century slum in Lower Manhattan, but no one probably considered it the stuff of

**DANIEL M.  
GOLD**

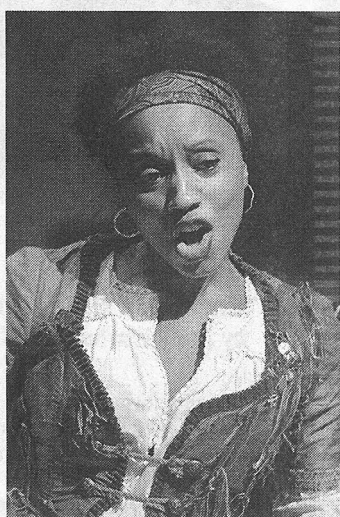
**THEATER  
REVIEW**

song and dance — until Larry Kirwan, the novelist, playwright and, not incidentally, leader of the rock band Black 47. Now, at the Cell Theater as part of the 1st Irish Theater Festival, Mr. Kirwan’s rousing “Hard Times: An American Musical” examines the clashes among nativists, Irish immigrants and free blacks, ingeniously using the life and works of Stephen Foster, America’s first great songwriter, to tell the tale.

It’s the summer of 1863, and Foster (Jed Peterson) is holed up in his favorite Five Points saloon, trying to eke out another song as he slides deeper into his cups. Just outside, the Draft Riots are starting, and the very character of the Points — a neighborhood where poor whites and blacks live together easily enough — is under siege, with ethnic frictions about to explode, presaging the difficult future that awaits the city after the Civil War ends.

The crowd in the bar includes Nelly Blyth (Almeria Campbell), the black woman who owns it; Owen Duignan (John Charles McLaughlin), the young Irishman who fronts her house band; Thomas Jefferson (Stephane Duret), Nelly’s black handyman; and Michael Jenkins (Philip Calen), a nativist New Yorker who hopes to court Nelly. In flashback we also meet Foster’s wife, Jane (Erin West), for whom he wrote “Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair.” Tensions are eased by Foster’s songs, though the music is also used to comment on the building drama.

Placing Foster’s songs in an ideal setting to understand their impact, Mr. Kirwan has reinvigorated them, with members of the full-throated cast singing a fiery “Camptown Races,” a tender “Oh, Susanna,” a soulful “Old Folks at Home,” a stirring “Hard Times Come Again No More.” (No slouch with a lyric himself, Mr. Kirwan has added the tart stanza or two to Foster classics



STEVEN SIMRING

**Hard Times: An American Musical**  
Almeria Campbell in Larry Kirwan’s show about Stephen Foster at the Cell Theater.

*Adding unexpected dimensions to a songwriter’s life.*

and contributed a couple of songs as well.)

While clearly respectful of Foster’s legacy, Mr. Kirwan does make one leap, intimating that he was gay, a conclusion no biographer has reached. Still, for the purposes of this story, the speculation fits, informing Foster’s drinking, his long separation from his wife and child, and the melancholy that laced many of his later songs.

Under Kira Simring’s sure-handed direction “Hard Times” bursts with vitality: the Cell, an intimate space, becomes the saloon, burlap draped along the walls, a tattered flag hanging. The choreography, by Joe Barros, morphs Irish step-dancing into something close to tap. And the five men of the show’s band, led by Andrew Smithson, feel like characters themselves, joining in the revelry when the pace quickens.

By the end of the evening the audience is up, cheering and stamping. In “Hard Times” Mr. Kirwan has not only delivered a knockout entertainment, he’s done a public service too, reacquainting us with the Foster songbook and the striving, teeming America for which it was written.

*“Hard Times: An American Musical” continues through Sunday at the Cell Theater, 338 West 23rd Street, Chelsea; (212) 838-3006, Istirish.org.*