
THE MUSIC MAN

Reviewed by Ashlea Palladino, Associate Theater Critic
for John Garcia's THE COLUMN

A question struck me a few minutes into the first act of Garland Summer Musicals' production of Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man* (running through June 26th at the Granville Arts Center). What is it about some classic stage pieces that make them relevant and fresh while others seem to die on the vine? If we're thinking realistically there isn't much a production team can do to update a piece like *South Pacific* or *Mame* – the story is pretty well set in stone, and the music is what it is; changing these elements would detract from a piece's "classic" status, infuriate most theatergoers, and insult the original playwright and/or composer. The only answer I came up with is this: production value.

Like most of us, I've seen productions of classics that made me groan in agony and boredom, and mentally beg for the curtain call. Thankfully, GSM's production reminded me that classics are so named for a reason and this show imprinted upon me how overall production value could help a 54-year old musical maintain its energy and endurance.

Call me old fashioned but I absolutely adored seeing a full orchestra accompany a musical. As the lights dimmed, and Music Director Jeff Crouse raised his baton for the first notes of the overture, I prayed this glorious orchestra wouldn't be the only exciting thing about the show. Once the curtain opened and I got my first glimpse of the incredible set I then sent out another prayer that the actors would work their hardest to make the set and the orchestra look even better. And after a few bars of the first song "Rock Island" I relaxed and stopped praying altogether because it was obvious the theater gods had already made a stop in Garland and sprinkled their galvanizing glitter all over the Granville Arts Center. From the overture to the curtain call this show was an absolute treat, and my only regret was that audiences had but three opportunities left to experience it.

In terms of the production value, GSM's version of *The Music Man* rivaled shows I've seen at Casa Manana and Dallas Theatre Center. The sets designed by Kelly Cox, dressed by Lynn Maudlin, and built by Joe Murdock and a team of over thirty individuals, were realistic, thoroughly detailed, and executed with specific attention to perspective that felt similar to watching a 3-D movie. Most scenes utilized a giant painted canvas backdrop, and then smaller set pieces were brought onstage to augment the backdrop. For example, one canvas depicted a turn-of-the-century tree-lined street with houses and a few shops. During the scenes at the Paroo's home the crew rolled out a structure that matched the homes depicted on the canvas thereby compounding the three dimensional effect. The scenes on the train and in the library were similarly impressive.

The costumes designed by Michael Robinson and Suzi Shankle of Dallas Costume Shoppe were imaginative and reflective of the period. Dressing the forty-plus actors in this cast couldn't have been an easy feat and Mr. Robinson's and Ms. Shankle's attention to accessories – especially head pieces – lent authenticity to this vision of 1912 River City, Iowa. The costumes and coordinating hats worn by Eulalie

Shinn and her cohorts were especially appropriate and funny during "Pick-a-little."

I often marvel at the creativity of choreographers. I mean seriously...how many different moves can be developed and integrated into a song called "Shipoopi?" Choreographer Jeremy Dumont proved that with a band of talented dancers anything is possible. I'm going to fumble this a little (sorry Mr. Dumont) but there was a particular jumping movement that recurred several times throughout the show where the dancers brought their knees nearly up to their chins in very rapid succession. The synchronicity with which the dancers matched each other's height and rhythm was a blast to watch. I will admit however that my shins ached each time the dancers landed back on the stage. Ouch.

It would be impossible to say too many positive things about Jeff Crouse and his orchestra. As a group they were well-balanced, and they never overwhelmed the vocalists. Percussionist Ellen Gay deserved a special note of appreciation for the many hats she wore and the many clever effects she brought to various numbers like "Rock Island".

If I have one tiny complaint about this show it was with the sound design. While sound was balanced in most places, I had a hard time understanding some of the actors' lyrics when the ensemble was singing behind them (i.e. Harold Hill's solo lines on "Trouble" and Ethel's lines on "Pick-a-little"). Perhaps the sound team could make note of such instances and raise the level on the soloists' microphones when necessary.

The gentlemen who made up the quartet – Olin Britt (Steven E. Beene), Oliver Hix (Laurence Smith), Ewart Dunlop (R. Bradford Smith), and Jacey Squires (Dennis Gullion) – were the vocal highlight of the show for me. There is something about four-part a cappella harmony that genuinely curls my toes! The quartet's "Lida Rose" was, on its own merits, my favorite song of the night but coupled with Marian Paroo's "Will I Ever Tell You," the sequence was a home run/touchdown/knock out.

Speaking of Marian Paroo...Jacquelyn Lengfelder was delightful in her portrayal of the spinster-ish town librarian and piano teacher. Ms. Lengfelder managed an easy composure that made her convictions believable but also left her vulnerable and open to emotion. The transition in her character from suspicious and doubting to loving and wanting love was seamless. Ms. Lengfelder's chemistry with her onstage mother and brother as well as her chemistry with Harold Hill was specific and pointed but also seemed effortless.

Young Winthrop Paroo played by Liam Taylor nearly stole each of his scenes from his fellow actors. His "Gary, Indiana" was perfectly matched to his character, and I was impressed with his comfort on the stage given his age. And to Mr. Taylor's well-deserved credit the audience's response to his curtain call bow was the loudest, most enthusiastic of the evening.

James Williams was well-cast as Mayor Shinn and his mispronunciations of nearly every word he spoke were right on the money. As the Mayor's wife Eulalie, Melissa Tucker flexed her comedic muscles and provided much of the evening's humor. Her partners in schtick, Alma Hix (Christia Caudle), Maude

Dunlop (Linda Frank), Ethel Toffelmier (Elise Libbers), Mrs. Squires (Delynda Johnson Moravec), and Mrs. Britt (Julie Mullings), deserved props for their Greek fountain as well as their "dance" while traveling toward the ice cream sociable. Stephen Raikes (as Tommy Djilas) and Jill Nicholas (as Zaneeta Shinn) stood out amongst this very talented group of dancers.

As the show's headliner, Stan Graner bore much of the responsibility for moving the story along in that he had to convey the craftiness of Harold Hill's confidence man, all the while remaining likeable to the townspeople. At first glance Mr. Graner seemed a bit more...ummm... mature than a typical Harold Hill but his lighthearted performance style and the speed with which he solidified chemistry with Ms. Lengfelder overcame my doubts. Mr. Graner also blended very nicely during the portions of the show where he sang with the men's quartet.

I often hear complaints from actors that a show's ensemble is overlooked in favor of the leading and featured players. While unfortunate, this oversight is sometimes easy with a truly great ensemble because we critics have nothing about which to complain. I wanted to take this opportunity to congratulate all of the salesmen, the members of the marching band, and all of the men, women and children who made up the residents of River City. Director Buff Shurr must also be applauded for offering such focused guidance to his actors, a probability that was evident in the very distinctive characterizations that came through each actor in this very large ensemble.

Judge as you will but I have never seen Cats. I've never had the desire to see Cats. I've made excuses over the years as to why I haven't seen Cats. Seeing Cats is nowhere on my bucket list. But. Cats is running next month at Garland Summer Musicals and I think I've finally run out of excuses. Meow!

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THE MUSIC MAN by Meredith Wilson
Garland Summer Musicals at the Granville Arts Center
300 N. Fifth Street, Garland, TX 75040
Runs through June 26th

Shows are Friday and Saturday at 8:00 pm and Sunday at 2:30 pm
Tixs can be purchased online at www.garlandsummermusicals.org
or by calling [972-205-2790](tel:972-205-2790)