

The Column by John Garcia

Thoroughly Modern Millie by Garland Summer Musicals

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Reviewed by Jeremy William Osborne, Associate Critic for John Garcia's THE COLUMN

For thirty two years Garland Summer Musicals has presented outstanding theatrical productions in downtown Garland, TX. Their efforts have made the theatre scene a true diamond in the rough, not only in the DFW area but all over Texas. *Thoroughly Modern Millie* continues their tradition of excellence with exceptional dancing, music and acting by Equity and non-Equity actors alike.

The story of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* is one of a girl fresh off the bus from Kansas landing in New York City in 1922, set on marrying a man for wealth and not love. To Millie, this is the “modern” way of living. Quickly she's mixed up with a suitor she doesn't want, a man who doesn't want her, and a sex trafficker who is shipping her friends to China. As with all classic musical comedies, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* ends with the villain captured, marriage proposed, and true love conquering all.

Music Director Gary Okeson has the entire cast and orchestra well prepared for the challenges of this musical. Erica Peterman belts her way through number after number, supported by a chorus of some of the best voices in the metroplex. Gregory Hullett doesn't miss a step in the high tempo “The Speed Test” which uses music from the patter “My Eyes Are Fully Open” from Gilbert and Sullivan's *Ruddigore*. As well, Andy Gosnell croons delightfully in “What Do I Need with Love?”. The orchestra and voices of the actors are well balanced and clear. Audibly, everything is a joy.

The choreography is simply amazing. Joseph Jones is a strong early contender for Best Choreographer at next year's Column Awards. The first pair of songs, “Not for the Life of Me” and “*Thoroughly Modern Millie*”, showcase the talents of the hard working ensemble right out of the gate. The show has an abundance of tap dancing, most creatively in “The Speed Test”, where lady typists sit at their desks and make typing noises with their tap shoes. Jones even successfully choreographs a dance that progresses the relationship of the two main characters on a narrow window ledge.



The sets are simple but perfect for a classic musical. They celebrate the Art Deco style of the 1920s while not being too realistic. Thoroughly Modern Millie uses painted backdrops and neatly decorated, rolling set pieces to quickly transition from one scene to another and transport the audience to the classic theatrical experience of fifty years ago.

The one interesting lighting element is the use of a tiny spotlight at the stage foot to simulate the flash of a camera taking mug shots. Maybe I'm just weird but I'm the kind of person who looks at a set and tries to find the oddity in its setup, so seeing a lone light on the apron of the stage immediately caught my attention. It does provide a very nice effect for its purpose.

Costumes in this production are excellent. They accurately portray the look of the period, with men in straight suits and girls in pencil skirts and short, bobbed hair. The girls at the hotel Millie is living in are all color coordinated in distinctive colors. The drones of female workers at Sincere Trust, where Millie works as a stenographer, are all dressed in the same monotonous yellow blouses with brown skirts. This is a great way to represent the lack of individuality in office workers and what a special person Millie is for dressing uniquely. The flurry of colors in the dance costumes make the sequences that much more interesting to watch, like a kaleidoscope.



Garland Summer Musicals has a near perfect cast for this show. Erica Peterman is wonderful as the naive girl from Kansas with a stubborn “Don't get in my way” attitude. Her powerful, bright voice brings life to Millie's dreams and envelopes the audience into her world. From the start, the audience's eyes are glued to her as she confidently strides across the stage. No one else in the show commands attention like Peterman.



However, Andi Allen has several attempts to steal the show as Mrs. Meers, the villain who traffics orphan girls from her hotel to Hong Kong for a hefty fee from a mysterious benefactor named Buddha. Mrs. Meers pretends to be Chinese although she is Caucasian and a failed Broadway actress. Unfortunately, as directed and performed her character, and the characters of her henchmen, Ching Ho and Bun Foo, are horrifically racist.

These characters are like Mickey Rooney's Asian character in "Breakfast at Tiffany's"; ridiculous stereotypes unnecessary to the rest of the show. It took at least until after intermission for me to get over it and enjoy Allen's performance, which is incredible. She hilariously needles Muzzy van Hossmere about her age as she tries to portray a teenager. Her songs are superb as Allen vamps it up during "They Don't Know" and manipulates her henchmen in "Muqin."

Millie has a tumultuous and reluctant relationship with Jimmy Smith, played by Andy Gosnell. Gosnell's performance is reminiscent of Cary Grant. He's suave and handsome yet flawed enough to be comedic. Gosnell has a smooth voice that lends itself to the gentleness of the character well. However, he's often overpowered by Peterman while on stage together. Overall, he's a good leading man who sometimes gets lost in Peterman's spotlight.

Gregory Hullett is fantastic as Mr. Trevor Graydon, Millie's boss, whom she has her sights set on marrying. He shows off his linguistic dexterity in "The Speed Test" and classic vibrato with "Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life/Falling in Love with Someone", a song originally written by Victor Herbert and Rida Johnson Young for Naughty Marietta. With a stiff demeanor and commanding, strong voice, Hullett plays the tough boss who doesn't have time for personal relationships. That is until Miss Dorothy Brown steps into his life. Then he has trouble functioning without her.

Andrea Cox is charming as Miss Dorothy Brown who, like Millie, wants to experience a new life unfamiliar to her own. However, Miss Brown is coming from rich, high society. Cox plays Brown's bubbly naivete to great effect, with a soprano voice that rings throughout the auditorium.



The matron of the musical is Muzzy van Hossmere, played by Patty Granville, who exists to grant knowledge to Millie in her time of need and show her that she doesn't have to be a high born, modern woman to have a happy life. Patty Granville is ideal for this role. She might as well be playing herself by how naturally she portrays Muzzy and her bon vivant lifestyle. Also, she effortlessly performs "Only in

New York" and "Long as I'm Here with You."

Garland Summer Musicals is known for perennially putting on some of the best musicals in North Texas and Thoroughly Modern Millie is no exception. Like Bells are Ringing last year,

everybody needs to see their production to get a clear idea of how a classic musical should be presented.