Written by Mike Schulz
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Over the past 10 months, the stage space at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre in Moline has been transformed into a ballpark (for the venue's production of *Rounding Third*), an Italian villa (for *Enchanted April*), and the entire town of Bedford Falls (for *It's a Wonderful Life*).

But these days, after climbing the stairs to the second level of the Barn, the first thing you notice about the set for *Sweet & Hot: The Songs of Harold Arlen* (running through May 21) is something more unexpected than anything found on those previous sets: a piano.

The venerable community theatre is currently celebrating its 77th year of performances, the last 46 of them spent in the upper level of the Barn. But the last time the organization attempted a musical was close to 10 years ago – 1997's *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* – and even then, says *Sweet & Hot* director Tom Morrow, "it was *only* a piano. I believe this is the first time we've ever [had] a *band*. We got drums, we got piano, we got trumpet, we got bass, we got reeds, and we got a guitar."

They also have, for the show's cast members, body microphones, the first time live mics are being used in the Barn's history. (With a week of rehearsals to go, Morrow reveals, with obvious relief, "The sound is coming along much better than we anticipated.")

They also have a staggering *87* costumes for the production's 17 cast members and six band members. (*Sweet & Hot* costume designer Donna Weeks says, regarding the intimidating number of wardrobe changes, "It's the art of the revue.")

They also have, from all accounts, an incredibly focused batch of singers and actors. ("They're very dedicated," says the show's musical director – and featured performer – Jonathan Turner, "and very hard-working. They have an incredibly strong work ethic.")

They appear to have it all.

But a question remains.

Which poor saps had the unfortunate task of schlepping a piano through the barn doors, up to that second-floor loft, on to the stage, and onto a separate platform three feet *above* the stage?

"West Music was nice enough to let us use one," Morrow laughs, "and they delivered it, and they'll pick it up. Two guys. They did it all by themselves. They put it up there so slick it was *incr*

edible
. And Ducky's was really nice to us, too. They're letting us have some tuxedos for the show.

"Everybody's helping out," Morrow says, smiling. "I mean, *everybody* wants to see Playcrafters do a musical again."

"We Try to Pick Some Good Stuff"

A visit to the Playcrafters Web site (http://www.playcrafters.com) reveals that the Playcrafters barn itself, located at the intersection of 50th Street and 35th Avenue in Moline, was erected in 1914, yet didn't house theatrical presentations until 1960. Before that time, the organization – founded in 1928 through an initiative by Rock Island's Playground & Recreations Commission – was a theatre without a home; for 32 years, Playcrafters works were viewed in church basements, schools (such as the Audubon School and Moline High School), and even restaurants (including the venue where The Rusty Pelican now stands).

Finally, in 1958, local citizen Dr. William Otis presented the organization with the title to the barn, and although the gift was a generous one, it didn't exactly come without hitches. Having remained dormant for 25 years, the edifice was without heat and running water, three feet of horse manure covered the main floor, and amidst the soot and grime of the hayloft were, the Web site says, "an *awesome* accumulation of pigeon droppings." (Italics theirs.)

The task of restoring the barn fell on Playcrafters volunteers, among them the late Robert Sonneville, who would go on to be the organization's general manager in the 1970s. Over a period of two years, Sonneville spearheaded renovations that included the installation of plumbing, the laying of a cement floor on the barn's main level, the insulation of numerous cracks in the barn's walls, and, of course, a thorough cleanup of that hayloft. (Theatre, my friends, is dirty work.)

In 1960, the once-dilapidated barn officially became the Barn Theatre – complete with dressing rooms, stairwells, restrooms, and a theatre office – and despite having no furnace to ward off the chill, Playcrafters' debuted its first Barn production, *Born Yesterday*, that October.

A quartet of furnaces were subsequently installed in the theatre, and since 1960, the Barn has undergone many more renovations; in 1988, a $100,000 campaign for improvements led to the addition of more storage space, the creation of new restrooms, and – much to West Music's delight, I'm sure – the installation of an elevator, and in 2000, the Playcrafters parking lot was resurfaced with blacktop.

Yet what hasn't changed over the years is the fondness local audiences have for this theatrical institution, and the eclecticism inherent in Playcrafters' annual seasons. Visitors to the Barn have been treated to timeless American classics (*A Streetcar Named Desire, Death of a Salesman, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*), beloved comedies (
Blithe Spirit, The Importance of Being Earnest, You Can't Take It with You
), mysteries and thrillers (

Laura, The Mousetrap, Ten Little Indians
), recent farces (
The Nerd, Lend Me a Tenor, I Hate Hamlet
), modern dramas (
How I Learned to Drive, The Laramie Project, Proof
), and even the occasional world premiere (local playwright and professor Melissa McBain's
Altar Call
, an exploration of the church's stance on homosexuality, which debuted at the Barn last May).

Not a lot of musicals, though.

"We don't wanna infringe on Music Guild's territory," says Morrow in reference to Playcrafters' theatrical neighbors in Moline, whose organization has been in operation since 1949. "They do all the big-scale musicals, and we're kind of the small-scale stuff. And that's fine."

However, Morrow adds that deference to Music Guild isn't the sole reason for Playcrafters' infrequent inclusion of musicals among its offerings. "Musicals are harder to do because they *co st*
more. The rights to the musicals are a lot more expensive, and since we have a smaller house [the Barn seats 264 audience members], we kind of leave that to Music Guild.

"But we thought we'd try to do, like, a musical *revue*," the *Sweet & Hot* director says, "and see how it goes over."

Regarding that "we," Morrow states that Playcrafters has "a play-reading committee. They have a three-year term, there's, like, five people, and they read a bunch of plays." Then, he continues, "they make a recommendation to the board," composed of seven Playcrafters volunteers. "They usually recommend 12 [plays], and from *that*, the board usually picks six that they want to do."

("*I'm* on the board," he laughs. "But this is my last year. I tell ya, I would much rather just do the shows. The board's a lot of additional responsibility, and," says the veteran of such Playcrafters efforts as *The Taming of the Shrew, Sly Fox, Inherit the Wind*, and *Wait Until Dark*, "I just love doin' the shows.")

Although the majority of plays during a traditional Playcrafters season are comedies – Morrow admits, "Dramas don't sell as well" – the board understands the importance of variety. "We try to pick some good stuff," Morrow says modestly, referring to Playcrafters' current season, which includes forthcoming productions of *Our Town* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. In addition to comedies, says the director, "We like to see us do at least one drama every year, too. It's good for the actors to get some dramas, you know?"

And not *just* the actors. "When we did *Altar Call*," Morrow continues, "I think that was a step out of the ordinary for us, and we were a little worried about how it would be received with our general audience. But I gotta say that, you know, sometimes I think we
underestimate

our audience. They all seemed to like it, we didn't get a lot of complaints," he chuckles, "and it was *very* well done."

As audience tastes often prove unpredictable, Playcrafters' board of directors will, on occasion, solicit the opinions of their audiences through written surveys, to determine what shows *they'd* like to see. And the results of those surveys, Morrow says, share a common theme.

"Every time we did any kind of audience survey," Morrow says, "they always wanted to see *musicals*."

Recollecting a few of the audience responses Playcrafters received, Morrow smiles and shakes his head. "A couple of 'em would put on there, '*Phantom of the Opera*,' you know, and I kinda don't think we're gonna do that in this theatre," he laughs. "It's a little small [here] for that show."

He continues, "But, you know, we said, 'Let's try and give 'em one. That's what they wanna see. We'll see how it works out."

Hence, *Sweet & Hot: The Songs of ...*

... uh ...

... *who* again?

"Exactly!" exclaims Morrow, commenting on how unfamiliar many are with composer Harold Arlen's name. "We're gonna do our best to change that!"

"He Wrote *That*?"

Harold Arlen was born Hyman Arluck on February 15, 1905, and spent much of the early '20s performing in New York as a singer and pianist. Under the professional name Harold Arlen, he composed his first big hit in 1929, a Depression-era ditty entitled "Get Happy." Shortly thereafter, Arlen's career skyrocketed; working alongside a variety of collaborators, he wrote numerous shows for Harlem's legendary Cotton Club, several Hollywood musicals, and, over the next three decades, contributed to more than a dozen Broadway shows, including such titles as *Americana, Life Begins at 8:40, St. Louis Woman*, and 1944's *Bloomer Girl*.

Familiar with those? Maybe not.

But I'm betting you *are* familiar with at least a few of the more than *400* songs Arlen is credited with composing: "Stormy Weather," "It's Only a Paper Moon," "Come Rain or Come Shine," "That Old Black Magic," "Ill Wind," "Accentuate the Positive," "One for My Baby," "I Love a Parade," "The Man That Got Away," "Hit the Road to Dreamland," "I've Got the World on a

String," "Blues in the Night," "Last Night When We Were Young."

And even if none of *those* titles strike a chord with you, there's a little number entitled "Over the Rainbow" that might ring a bell; Arlen wrote the entire song score for 1939's *The Wizard of Oz*, receiving an Academy Award for Judy Garland's *Oz* number, which, in 2001, was voted the 20th Century's number-one song by the Recording Industry Association of America.

His compositions encompass nearly every musical genre of the period – romantic ballads, lighthearted up-tempo numbers, showtunes, torch songs – and the breadth and variety of his output is astonishing. So why isn't Harold Arlen referenced in the same breath as, say, Cole Porter or Irving Berlin?

"It's a mystery," says Morrow, although he does have a theory. "He didn't seek the limelight like Cole Porter did. Cole Porter *wanted* to be in the limelight; he wanted to be in shows himself, and he put himself out there for people to see. And Harold Arlen didn't really do that."

"There were a *number* of songs that I didn't know he wrote," says musical director Turner, who concurs with Morrow's analysis of Arlen's relative anonymity. "He just didn't seek a lot of publicity in his lifetime. He was a very shy person, apart from the times where he was on stage or playing." Turner adds that Arlen "didn't use a publicist to promote himself. Maybe he was just not the social person that the Cole Porters and Irving Berlins and Gershwins were. But his music definitely stands up to any of them."

Turner and Pamela Crouch – who serves as both *Sweet & Hot*'s choreographer and part of the show's performing ensemble – note that the musician didn't work exclusively with one regular collaborator, as many American songwriters of his period did. He partnered with numerous lyricists through the decades, including Ira Gershwin, Johnny Mercer, and, for 1954's *House of Flowers*, Truman Capote. ("We thought that was *hilarious*," says Crouch of Capote's involvement.) Turner and Crouch agree that the composer's frequent employment of collaborators may have contributed to Arlen's perhaps surprising lack of name recognition.

"I think that's one of the reasons that Arlen's not as well known," says Turner. "It wasn't just the Gershwin brothers, it wasn't just Irving Berlin and Cole Porter. He worked with so *many* different lyricists."

"To me," says Crouch, "that shows his *genius*, that he could work with all these people and create such a variety of music."

As a production dedicated to the composer's complete musical output would likely last *several* nights,

Sweet & Hot: The Songs of Harold Arlen presents a mere sampling – 34 songs – and Morrow admits that choosing one Arlen number above all others is nearly impossible. "I really love the song 'Stormy Weather,'" he says. "And I really love 'The Man That Got Away.' Those are two of my favorite torch songs. But I think my favorite song in the show is 'Lydia the Tattooed Lady,'" he says with a grin. "It's an old Marx Brothers song. I think people will enjoy that.

"When you see all the songs that he *did*," Morrow continues, "I mean, people are just gonna be, 'He wrote *that*? He wrote *that*?' They're gonna do that all the way through the show. And even the ones that *aren't* as well known, some of 'em are *really* nice songs." The director smiles. "We're even putting a little bio in the program about him, so that people can know a little bit more. I think, after this, people will say, 'Ohhh ... Harold *Arlen. He* wrote that song.'"

"Our Cast Has Been Phenomenal"

It's not just Playcrafters audiences who will be getting an Arlen education through *Sweet & Hot*. The show's 17 performers are as well.

Sweet & Hot: The Songs of Harold Arlen opened in New York's McCarter Theatre on April 3, 1993 – the *New York Times*' Alvin Klein wrote that the revue "is sustained by the composer's ineffable bounty and its own simulated sass" – and was originally devised for a cast of six: three women and three men. But Morrow says of the production's 34 songs, "You know, that's an awful lot for six people to learn, and we also thought that some of the songs deserved a chorus."

"Tom had a good idea in terms of expanding the cast," says Turner. "It's good to get more people involved and spread out the workload."

Yet while many of *Sweet & Hot*'s musical numbers have proven "second-nature" for cast members, Turner states that learning the music can, for the show's performers, be challenging, especially for those not well-versed in Arlen's *oeuvre*. "I mean, people come from all different backgrounds," he says of the show's cast. "We have a lot of veterans of musical theatre in the show, and people that are fairly new, and so it's hard, sometimes, to get people up to speed."

Even those veterans, however, have found Arlen's compositions daunting. "This is a real challenging show," says Greg Golz, who previously appeared in such Music Guild productions as *Kiss Me, Kate, Two by Two*, and last summer's *Fiddler on the Roof*. "The arrangements are very tight harmonies – the jazz-type arrangements. And so it was a struggle at first, trying to put it together, voice-wise. Now we're finally coming together."

Golz's sentiments are echoed by those of his wife, Jan Golz, who has enjoyed singing with her husband for more than 30 years, and, in *Sweet & Hot*, performs Arlen's duet "Down with Love" opposite him. "We're not big on jazz," she laughs, "and some of the chords are funny, in the chorus numbers in particular. They're pretty tight. And of course, you're not standing next to someone who's singin' your part, so you'd better darn well *know* it."

"The harmonies are great," Turner explains, "but it's hard on the singers to be able to find their notes in a cluster of, you know, four to six parts," especially when particular Arlen numbers "*are n't* real classics and standards that people are familiar with.

"But," he continues, "I think a lot of times musical-theatre audiences might take for granted the amount of preparation" that goes into a production such as *Sweet & Hot*. "You don't see all the behind-the-scenes rehearsal that *has* to go into it."

"Our cast has been phenomenal," says Crouch. "We'll have one rehearsal to learn a number. I'll just say, 'This is it, write it down,' and then they'll have to turn around and *do* it. And four days later, not only do they remember the choreography, the movement, but they're *adding* to it. The energy is just fabulous. The cast is incredibly professional."

"I tell ya," says Morrow, "some of the voices in this are gonna *impress* some people," and he also hopes that Playcrafters audiences will have the chance to be impressed by *future* musical offerings at the Barn Theatre, stating that the Playcrafters board is "still in the process of picking next year's" season.

"To be honest," he says, "we're kind of waitin' to see how this musical does. Because we'd kinda like to do another musical revue. But we wanna make sure that [*Sweet & Hot*] does really well before we commit to one," adding that one of the shows on Playcrafters' 2006-7 short list is the Johnny Burke revue *Swinging on a Star*, and that he sees musicals such as *I Do! I Do!* and *Little Shop of Horrors* as possibilities for future Playcrafters seasons.

"If we do real well ticket-wise," the *Sweet & Hot* director says, grinning, "maybe we'll do one again."

Sweet & Hot: The Songs of Harold Arlen *plays Moline's Barn Theatre through May 21. For*

tickets, call (309)762-0330.