Written by Mike Schulz
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By the time the amateur male strippers perform their exuberant, baring-it-all finale in the Timber Lake Playhouse's *The Full Monty*, it might take all your will to not leap from your seat and join them. The high spirits generated by this show are a little overwhelming; with the possible exception of the Clinton Area Showboat's current production of *Ruthless*, *The Full Monty* is the best time I've had at the theatre in two months. It's joyous, technically dexterous, thrillingly performed, and, best of all, absolutely fearless. (You're aware of this by the end of the *overture*, when a bare-assed stripper, hounded by female groupies, races across the stage.)

If there's any downside to the production – in which six unemployed steelworkers plan to raise money as "regular guy" Chippendales – it has nothing to do with Timber Lake's presentation. The show's book, by Terrence McNally, is an often-awkward re-staging of the 1997 movie; the dialogue is exposition-heavy and glistens with too much musical-comedy polish. (McNally's bitchy Broadway sensibility doesn't quite mesh with the show's working-class-Buffalo setting.) But McNally's source material saves him – the show features a half-dozen plotlines and more than a dozen major characters, many of whom subvert expectation in hugely gratifying ways – and the gifted composer/lyricist David Yazbek provides some great, stylistically varied songs.

The Full Monty is fine, but Timber Lake's *Full Monty* is *wonderful*; director Brad Lyons and his sterling ensemble make the production play even better than it should. The cast's accomplishments are even more impressive when you realize that nearly all of the show's actors are in their early 20s; what kind of insane talent pool is Timber Lake privy to?

In the central role of Jerry Lukowski, Adam Henry is a dream of a musical-comedy lead. Blessed with a strong rock-and-roll tenor that can switch to a heartbreaking falsetto on a dime, Henry anchors the show with energy and charisma, and his performance of "Breeze Off the River," which Jerry sings to his sleeping son, is the musical's most touching moment.

But what's so invigorating here is that everyone on that stage has the presence of a star. Audiences should never take for granted a musical-comedy ensemble that can actually act; suddenly, lyrics that seem merely clever on the page can gain an unexpected emotional power, and sketchy characters can prove to be, in the right hands, essential to the structure. Among a remarkable cast that includes Erin Anderson, Justin Banta, Matthew Callahan, Emily Firth, and Clay Sanderson, here are a half-dozen particular favorites: Taylor Bruice, marvelously relaxed and self-assured; Andrew Parker Greenwood, who takes the show's most troublesome character – Malcolm, the comically suicidal nebbish – and turns him into a brilliantly funny and touching figure; Amanda Hendricks, doing an inspired Andrea Martin turn; Victoria Watson, whose devastating disappointment gives the show some welcome emotional hues; Ella Mouria Seet, her rendition of the "Life With Harold" rumba being an early show-stopper; and Justin Sample, whose performance as that bare-assed stripper reveals an actor at his most (appropriately) confident.

Special mention must also be made of Daniel Riley and Steven Johnson, whose performance

bios, oddly enough, aren't included in the program. Riley's low-key wit and effortless stage presence are breaths of fresh air, and Johnson is an incredibly focused and naturalistic teen performer; the scenes between him and his stage father have a beautiful give-and-take. (There's another weekend left, Timber Lake; it's not too late to print out some biographical inserts for these two.)

Even beyond the performers, this production is sublime, so astonishingly well-lit, designed, and choreographed that some scenes might leave you breathless. (The staging of "Scrap," "The Goods," "Let It Go," and particularly "Michael Jordan's Ball" rank among the finest musical numbers I've seen onstage in years.) Everyone involved appears to be working at the top of their game; the show is the kind of expansive good time that reminded me why I came to love theatre in the first place.

A few weeks back, a friend raved about Timber Lake's season-opening production of *Ragtime*, which she had just seen. I explained that previous theatrical commitments were keeping me from attending, and she responded, "Trust me, it's worth skipping something else to catch this one." If
The Full Monty
is any indication of the quality of Timber Lake's 2005 season, I'm guessing she was right. I guarantee I won't be missing any more of them.

For tickets or more information, call (815) 244-2035.