

## No, You're the Top!: "Anything Goes," at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre through July 23

Written by Mike Schulz  
Tuesday, 18 July 2006 22:32

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Despite a fairly comprehensive exposure to American musical-theatre classics, it wasn't until last Wednesday that I finally saw a stage production of *Anything Goes*, currently playing at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre (CAST). Afterwards, I stopped to say hello to CAST producer, and *Anything Goes* direct or, Jay Berkow, and he asked if I'd ever seen the show before. I admitted that I hadn't, and he threw me a sideways grin and said, "This one's a little different. It's not usually done this way."

And I'll tell you what I told him: After this version, why would you want to see it done any *other* way?

For CAST's *Anything Goes* is absolutely superb, a ceaselessly funny and thoroughly inventive work, and it's buoyed by a cast who look as though they couldn't possibly be having a better time. The audience, however, may be having even *more* fun. By the middle of Act II, it was rare when a musical number *wasn't* being interrupted by applause mid-song, and the show's inevitable, deserved standing ovation

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was accompanied by a sound that, as a performer, you live for - the opening-night crowd, *en masse*, vigorously clapping in rhythm to the curtain-call music. I'm not sure that any of us - cast and audience alike - wanted the show to end.

*Anything Goes*, with its exquisite Cole Porter score, is a madcap mélange of mistaken identity and romantic turmoil set aboard a trans-Atlantic cruise ship, and even as an *Anyt*  
*hing Goes* neophyte, it's pretty clear that CAST's version isn't beholden to the spirit of Porter's 1934 original, or even 1987's lauded Broadway revival. (Any lingering doubts are erased by the hysterical *Titanic* spoof in Act II.)

In Berkow's vision, there's *nothing* here that doesn't deserve a goosing; the lovers' entanglements, the "spontaneous" dance numbers, and even the ballads and torch songs - "I Get a Kick Out of You" and "All Through the Night" especially - are all given a parodistic tweak. *Anything Goes* is, at heart, a burlesque, yet Berkow stages the production more in the style of a rapid-fire '30s comedy *à la His Girl Friday*; the show is devoid of sentimentality because, like those '30s classics, there isn't *time* for sentimentality, not when there are such good verbal and visual jokes to be told. Under Berkow's divine direction, *Anything Goes* ' pacing never lags, the inspiration never falters, and the cast comes through with one joyful portrayal after another.

Pinpointing favorite performances is a mostly futile exercise, but I think I have it narrowed down to two. As the stuffy British twit Evelyn Oakleigh, Rob Engelson is so smart and clever - clipping and elongating words where you don't expect him to - that his prissy caricature would make your jaw drop if you weren't so busy roaring at him; Evelyn's attempts to grapple with Americanized English ("Make it ... *snappy*? Yes! Make it *snappy*!") showcase Engelson's gifts brilliantly. And as the floozie Bonnie, who looks like a slightly beaten-up Kewpie doll, Allison Hendrix not only attacks her role with startling energy, but lifts the energy level of everyone *around* her. Hendrix is a dazzlingly confident comedienne here - yelping with pleasure, the blithely libidinous Bonnie seems turned on by her own sexiness - and she lends knockout power to her vocals; Hendrix's thrilling performance of "Heaven Hop" is an early show-stopper.

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Yet there wasn't a featured performer here whom I *didn't* adore. As Billy Crocker, Benjamin Cole, with his rubbery physique and devilish grin, could be channeling Jim Carrey, and the actor's quick-wittedness in the role is never less than inspiring. Equaling Cole in hilarity and shrewdness is Jeffrey Fauver, who, as Moonface Martin, delivers most of his best wisecracks from under his breath; Fauver can toss off standard punchlines with such wit that you're nearly embarrassed to be laughing as hard as you are. Cassandra Marie Nuss is a ballsy riot as Reno Sweeney - a tough-talkin' dame whom any guy would want to hide from Mother - and Maggie Mountsier, in the traditionally vapid ingénue role, plays Hope Harcourt as an endearingly spoiled ditz, and giggles at Cole's antics with such guileless naturalism you happily giggle at both him *and* her.

And so many more! Colin Douglass, Nicole Horton, Chris Appuhn, Isaac Jankowski - who, at age 14, is an *astounding* dancer - Zach Borja, Jack Maisenbach ... the list of talents goes on and on. (Quite literally - there are more than two dozen others whose contributions I'm failing to cite, not to mention those in the show's terrific six-piece orchestra.)

*Anything Goes'* list of spectacular musical numbers is similarly impressive, with special kudos to Sheryl Villa for her often stunning choreography; Act I's rousing finish, featuring a lengthy tap sequence performed *without* musical accompaniment, is as transporting a curtain-closer as could be imagined. From beginning to end, this show is just wonderful, and I'm overjoyed that CAST's *Anything Goes* was my first stage contact with this legendary material; Cole Porter purists may bitch, but I'm betting they'll be the only audience members who *could*

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*For tickets, call (563)242-6760.*