

## Flop Flipped: "Light Up the Sky," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre through February 24

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 20 February 2008 02:43

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Truth be told, I'm rather envious of the audiences who'll be seeing *Light Up the Sky* during its second weekend at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, because while I had a mostly terrific time at Friday night's production, I'm guessing that subsequent crowds will have an even better one.

As a whole, the only things really missing from playwright Moss Hart's catty theatre comedy were speed and assurance, and while these weren't exactly insignificant issues, they weren't debilitating ones, either; under the direction of Eugenia Giebel and Michaela Giebel Moore, the actors were clearly having fun with Hart's enjoyably bitchy dialogue, and that fun was infectious. It shouldn't take much effort, though, to turn this good show into a *really* good show. The performers just need to be less hesitant about selling their characterizations (and quicker with their cue pickups), and for a hint on how to accomplish this, I offer the cast one directive: Watch Susan Philhower.

Hart's 1948 comedy concerns the out-of-town tryout of a new Broadway drama that, based on the opening-night laughter, looks to be an embarrassing bust, and among the hyper-tense assemblage reacting to the crisis - a group that includes the play's director (Dave Rash), author

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(Eric Noyd), and leading lady (Molly McLaughlin) - Philhower portrays the production's wealthy co-producer, Frances Black. Her role isn't larger than anyone's in *Light Up the Sky*, yet the actress handily strolls off with Richmond Hill's latest, and does so through the simplest of means: She enters as a fully formed, brazenly unapologetic stereotype and earns laughs - *many* laughs - merely by staying in character.

Employing the lightly exaggerated Noo Yawk cadences of *Guys & Dolls'* Adelaide, and delivering her dialogue with disarming matter-of-factness, Philhower creates a wholly appealing, sensibly money-hungry comic figure, and Frances' routines on the play's presumed awfulness and the indulgent spending of her co-financier husband (David Bailey) are witheringly, hilariously sarcastic. Yet watch Philhower when she's *not* speaking. Alert to the action and conversations around her, she emits continuous trickles of comedically resigned impatience; the actress connects with her role so well that she doesn't have to do much more than *behave* to be supremely engaging.

If several others don't quite match her, it's only because they seem slightly timid about outlining their characters with the necessary broad strokes, and perhaps a bit unsure about their lines. (On Friday, there weren't a *lot* of awkward conversational pauses - just enough of them to be noticeable.) When the other actors *are* feeling secure, though, it's easy to tell; the jokes, and the characters' personalities, tend to pop like firecrackers.



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Jan Golz, as McLaughlin's level-headed mother, oftentimes pops the loudest, and not just because of the actress' glorious, fathoms-deep speaking voice, which seems tailor-made for deadpan comedy. Golz's unforced naturalism can knock a gag out of the park, and the timing on her punchlines is superb; the actress waits just the tiniest of beats before unleashing a baritone zinger. (She's also an occasional *wordless* riot here, as in the smartly directed sequence in which her character considers throttling some off-stage drunkards.) Renaud Haymon, as a happily overwhelmed Mason, makes strong acting look as effortlessly relaxed as breathing; the audience was audibly disappointed when he was unceremoniously scooted off-stage. And Dave Rash, currently celebrating his 40th anniversary with Richmond Hill, plays the over-emotional director with a veteran's panache.

There's an odd element to Rash's performance, though, and to those of Dave Bailey and Greg Golz, as well. *Light Up the Sky's* program features a summary of the show's plot - including its finale, which is also odd - in which Rash's character is described as a "swishy, lugubrious director." Yet while Rash's director is lugubrious, he's anything but swishy; Bailey's and Golz's characters *are*, though, and there are times when their fey mannerisms and prissy retorts don't mesh with the roles. (Bailey plays a gruff megalomaniac and Golz portrays the starlet's ineffectual husband.) I enjoyed the actors' willingness to play against expectation - Bailey delivered some particularly hysterical readings - but it was often difficult to determine whether we should laugh with or *at* them, as both Bailey and Golz appeared a tad leery about going over the top as much as they needed to.

Of course, it's entirely possible that the performers were somewhat thrown off their game by the illness of cast member Mary McCarter, whose role on Friday was played (and, under the circumstances, *well*-played) by co-director Giebel. Yet if I could've asked for more from the production, it would've been, quite simply, for even *more*, including more dripping egomania from Molly McLaughlin's diva, more self-directed anguish from Eric Noyd's novice author, and more jadedness from Don Hazen (whose smooth vocal rhythms add warmth to every role he's cast in) as a cynical playwriting pro. By

*Light Up the Sky*

's climax, the show-within-a-show looks to be in excellent shape; I'm thinking that continued familiarity with the piece and continued, deserved appreciation from Richmond Hill audiences will lead to the same happy ending for

*Light Up the Sky*

itself.

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*For tickets, call (309) 944-2244.*