

Broad Ways: "The Producers," at the Timber Lake Playhouse through August 10

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 06 August 2008 01:58

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Mel Brooks' musical *The Producers* - currently being produced at the Timber Lake Playhouse - received 12 Tony Awards in 2001, more than any Broadway musical before or since. And so I say this with all the deference and reverence that Brooks' historic achievement deserves: When Timber Lake's Justin Banta was throwing himself around the stage as a mincing Adolph Hitler in the show-within-a-show *Springtime for Hitler*, I was laughing so hard I almost freakin' *wet* myself.

There are still five months left in 2008, but I can't imagine witnessing a funnier stage sight this year than that of Banta's thrillingly self-absorbed stage director Roger DeBris, a proudly, profoundly outrageous image of show-biz egomania run amok. Unless, that is, the year's funniest sight is actually Zachary Gray as DeBris' "common-law assistant" Carmen Ghia, who exits rooms with Gloria Swanson-esque bravada and can turn a sibilant "s" into a 30-second comedy routine.

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Unless, of course, it's Jenny Guse's delirious Swedish nincompoop Ulla, who's as cuddly as a kitten and roughly half as bright. Or maybe Brandon Ford's tortured *artiste* Frank Liebkind, a play-writing Nazi in short pants who barks heavily accented directives and coos baby talk to his encaged homing pigeons. Or maybe the pigeons themselves, who respond to Liebkind's attentions with a synchronized "Sieg Heil!" salute. Or maybe... .

Truth be told, this *Producers*, which Brad Lyons directs with an unerring eye and ear for the ridiculous, features so many knockout moments that you can barely whittle your favorites down to 10, let alone one. Much of the show's genius is pure Brooks, of course. But the shtick-heavy material, which concerns a pair of hucksters trying to get rich off the worst play ever written, is hardly foolproof, and so it's to Timber Lake's enormous credit that just about everyone involved here seems to be working at the same level of *outré*, dizzily inspired silliness. After nearly three hours, I felt wiped out from laughing, but it's tough to fathom anyone not wishing the production would last even *longer*.

Some of the giggles, admittedly, were unintentional ones, as the show had its share of opening-night glitches: a few bumpy scene changes, a couple of awkwardly roving spotlights, a lengthy, "technical difficulties"-laden intermission. But as quick as audiences are to notice these sorts of gaffes, they're even quicker to forgive them, especially when the flubs are treated with hysterically forthright acknowledgment; addressing the halftime delay, general manager Richard Hall took the stage and apologized with good humor and a little soft-shoe. (The intermission's length was also referenced in two brilliant ad libs by actor Michael J. Yarnell.)

And crowds will both forgive and wholly *forget* goofs when a show is as chockablock with superbly nutty production numbers and performers as this

Producers

is. With the actors sporting costumer Kaitlyn Kearn's wonderful (oftentimes wonderfully *awful*

) designs, and with Brenda Didier providing zanily inventive choreography, the

Springtime for Hitler

section is the deserved

pièce de résistance

here. But the climactic "Prisoners of Love" would give it strong competition, as would the hilariously dreamlike "I Wanna Be a Producer," and in the rapturously funny "Keep It Gay" number, many of the most clever lyrics were inaudible, as our audience was laughing too hard to hear them.

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I wish I could adequately describe just how hysterical Danny Henning is as the pathologically edgy Leo Bloom. Soothing his character's nerves with a fetishistic piece of blue blanket - Bloom is like a musical-comedy Dennis Hopper in *Blue Velvet* - and speaking as if in mortifying fear of what his words will sound like once others hear them, the actor is a captivating comic (and vocal) talent here. And if Yarnell's Max Bialystock isn't quite at Henning's level, it's only because he appears hesitant about going for broke; he's obviously a first-rate actor, and no one's demanding Nathan Lane, but Yarnell isn't a natural comedian, and the role of Max kind of requires that its portrayer *be* one. He does, though, work his ass off, and you wind up admiring both Yarnell's chutzpah and his tirelessness in the role. Max's "Betrayed" solo, especially, was such a workout that in addition to applauding, our crowd would've gladly rewarded him with a La-Z-Boy and a beer.

With the show's ensemble members also emerging as buoyantly over-the-top comedians - Samantha Dubina gets a particularly noteworthy bit as a frighteningly lascivious octogenarian - *The Producers*

is one of the absolute best times I've yet had at the Mt. Carroll theatre, and based on Thursday's rapturous reception, I'm likely not alone in that opinion. I had the accidental pleasure of sitting next to a gentleman who told me he was one of the playhouse's founders 47 years ago - I learned later that his name is Sheldon Frank - and after relating our mutual love of the production, he asked if this was the first time I was seeing a show there. I proudly replied that it was actually my *twenty* -first Timber Lake experience. I'm stoked for at least 21 more.

For tickets, call (815) 244-2035.