

## Swingers: "Promises, Promises," at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre through September 21

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 17 September 2008 02:18

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Chris Walljasper isn't exactly a new face in area theatre, as the actor (and recent co-founder of Davenport's Harrison Hilltop Theatre) appeared in Genesis Guild's and Opera@Augustana's *Patience*

last year summer, the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's

*Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story*

this past winter, and, most memorably,

*Carousel*

and

*A Year with Frog & Toad*

for Rock Island's The Green Room.

Yet it's entirely conceivable that audiences for the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's *Promises, Promises*

will

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watch his performance and, on the drive home, ask one another, "Who *was* that guy?", because Walljasper is delivering the sort of terrifically engaging and endearing musical-comedy turn that makes you wonder why you haven't seen even more *of* him.

Directed by Jennifer Kingry, this stage adaptation of Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* - with music and lyrics by Burt Bacharach and Hal David, and a book by Neil Simon - is a charmingly (and intentionally) retro offering with a playful spirit and a wonderfully game supporting cast. It's Walljasper, though, who has to do most of the show's heavy lifting, and he carries it with invigorating ease; it's easy to imagine audiences new to his work seeing him in future presentations and saying, "Oh, he's the one from *Promises, Promises*" - and they'll likely be grinning when they say it.

In Playcrafters' latest, Walljasper portrays Chuck Baxter, a mild-mannered, negligible office drone in a New York City insurance company circa 1968. A true patsy, Chuck is routinely coerced into loaning out his apartment to the married, upper-management employees seeking a convenient locale for their adulterous trysts. Yet the man isn't entirely an innocent - despite the occasional inconvenience, Chuck willingly pimps out his pad for the chance to climb the corporate ladder - and *Promises, Promises* finds him sharing his dejection, irritation, and unrequited love for building-mate Fran Kubelik (Jaci Entwisle) in a running commentary, one that casts the audience as Chuck's confessors, accomplices, and only friends.

Loath as I generally am to compliment Neil Simon, it's a smashing conceit that allows Walljasper to come through with his finest, funniest work in the production. The actor delivers comically anguished narration with unforced honesty, but both the convention and Walljasper's handling of it succeed best when Simon's asides catch you by surprise, and they often do. Chuck isn't above twisting the facts of his recounted tales to give them happier endings - which he subsequently, guiltily admits to - and many of the show's biggest laughs occur when we merely *think* we're invisible spectators. (In Friday's most hysterical moment, Chuck's apartment "patrons" - played by David Bailey, Andy Davis, Greg O'Neill, and John Donald O'Shea - inched up behind our protagonist with murderous stares, and Walljasper, looking at neither the men *nor* us, addressed the audience's nervous giggles with, "Yes. I see them.")

