

## Sieg Heilarious!: "The Producers," at the Prospect Park Auditorium through April 5

Written by Mike Schulz  
Monday, 30 March 2009 06:00

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I'm sure there are those of you who don't think Mel Brooks' musical comedy *The Producers* is all that enjoyable, especially if your only acquaintance with the show is 2005's film version. But even if you felt burned by that woebegone adaptation, I urge you to check out Quad City Music Guild's current take on Brooks' modern classic, so you can see just how sublimely hysterical this material can actually be; I'm guessing that the only audiences who could possibly leave director Kevin Pieper's glorious show-biz satire in a bad mood are the easily offended and the abjectly humorless. (And you know who you are, because upon reading that, you instinctively presumed I was referring to *you* .)

Detailing the get-rich-quick scheme of veteran schlock-meister Max Bialystock (played here by Bruce Carmen) and schlock-meister-in-training Leo Bloom (Nathan Bates), both intent on staging Broadway's worst musical *ever*, Brooks' slaphappy carnival is legendary for its nearly continual assault on good taste; Jews, Nazis, Swedes, homosexuals, and the elderly all receive a thorough razzing. The genius of the show, however, is that the satire isn't hateful. (Well, it's a little hateful toward the Nazis, but they deserve it.) Not only is there an affectionate, infectious sense of silliness in *The Producers* that eschews mean-spiritedness, but Brooks reserves his most pointed lampoons for that which he obviously knows well: the cluelessness and raving egomania inherent in show business in general, and theatre in particular.

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Brooks lays into everyone here: morally (and literally) bankrupt producers and nebbish accountants and slutty starlets and arrogant directors, and even the very audiences who pay handsomely for trash and praise it to the sky. *The Producers* is so spectacularly chockablock with jokes, puns, outsize stereotypes, and hilarious musical numbers - sharply played here by Music Director Katie Casey's orchestra - that it appears the only conceivable way to mess it up (on stage, at least) is to *under* sell it, and underselling is the *last* thing that's happening on the Prospect Park stage. Music Guild's latest is a true rarity: a show in which everything is funny.



And I mean *everything*. The costumes are funny; Deb Holmes' outlandish designs oftentimes make you gasp right before you chuckle, particularly during the musical-within-a-musical's uproarious Bavarian fashion show. (Chorus girls make swooping entrances with pretzels and knockwurst on their heads.) The sets are funny; serving double-duty as *the Producers*

scenic designer, Pieper decorates a theatre director's sitting room with *outré* lavender walls and deep purple curtains, creating a pitch-perfect rendering of color-coordinated, *nouveau-riche* *fa-a-ab* ulousness.

The dancing is funny: Choreographer Kathy Schutter stages wildly inventive *Fiddler on the Roof* -inspired folk moves and rotating human swastikas and little old ladies using walkers as tap shoes. The props are funny; be on the lookout for the saluting pigeons and the poster for Bialystock's Yiddish musical triumph -

*Katz*. During Friday's opening-night performance, even the *accidents* were funny; when the curtains masking Bloom's name in lights failed to open properly, the subsequent jostling of the curtains into place amusingly portended Bloom's rocky road to

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Broadway glory.

Best of all, though, the cast is really, *really* funny, especially if you've caught *The Producers'* actors in previous Guild productions. (And chances are you *have*

; the show's ensemble features such familiar, crackling talents as Wendy Czekalski, Greg Golz, Sheri Hess, Erin Lounsberry, Valeree Pieper, Harold Truitt, Joe Urbaitis, Tom Vaccaro, and Todd Weber.) You may, for instance, have loved Mark McGinn and Mike Millar in other Guild roles, but you've never seen them as brazenly outrageous as they are portraying hypochondriacal director Roger DeBris and hissing "common-law assistant" Carmen Ghia, their every utterance and self-satisfied swish a piece of high-comedy heaven. Years of first-rate work still don't prepare you for Bates' fearless, shrieking apoplexy as Bloom, or for J. Adam Lounsberry's devastating comic

*oomph*

as heavily accented playwright Franz Leibkind.

*Nothing*

, meanwhile, quite prepares you for the divine Erika Thomas, whose blithely effervescent sexpot Ulla corners the market on radiant bubble-headedness. Frequent Guild patrons knew these performers were gifted - who knew they were also such thrillingly demented lunatics?



And happily, a new loon has joined their ranks; in his Guild debut, Carmen all but explodes with ferocious personality, gracing his role with a bit of Nathan Lane, a bit of Zero Mostel, a bit of Jeff Garlin, and an ingratiating, expansive joy that seems all his own. Carmen hits random clunker notes, but when he does, he hits them with such gusto that they end up sounding just right for Max - this actor understands that there's no such *thing* here as "too big" or "too broad." (A reminder I'd offer to several chorus members, who could stand to smile more.)

*The Producers*

is a delirious good time and, lest we forget, an incredibly

*brave*

Guild offering, ideal entertainment for everyone who gets why this exchange is such a hoot:

"Bloom! Where do you think you're going? You already *had* your toilet break!"

"I'm not *going* to the toilet; I'm going into *show business!*"

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*For tickets and information, call (309)762-6610 or visit [QCMusicGuild.com](http://QCMusicGuild.com).*