

Sink or Swim: "Singin' in the Rain," at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre through July 19

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 13 July 2009 06:00

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Let's cut right to it: Yes. During the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's presentation of *Singin' in the Rain*, it rained on-stage. And it rained *well*.

In this adaptation of the peerlessly entertaining movie musical, the downpour arrives in the last minutes of Act I, drenching both the playing area and Hollywood star Don Lockwood (portrayed here by the production's director, and the Showboat's artistic director, Patrick Stinson). Ecstatic about a recent professional inspiration and his love for nascent starlet Kathy Seldon (Nicole Horton), Don grins at the heavens and - as I presume you already know - embraces the storm with a piece of joyous choreography that finds him leaping on a lamppost, twirling his umbrella, and splashing in puddles. And I'm happy to report that the rain at Clinton's opening-night performance wasn't just impressive; it was as magical and memorable as you could ever hope for.

I don't know what his amusing title fully entails, but the show's program lists Wade Burnett as *Singin' in the Rain*'s "Rain Man," and the guy deserves a medal of some kind, or at least his very own standing ovation: The effects are *awesome*. With the rain cascading in sheets, landing with hugely satisfying splats, and looking beautiful

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under designer Brandon Cheney's lights, the indoor shower was a true *coup de théâtre*

, and made for an occasionally interactive experience for those sitting closest to the stage. (A mild warning to patrons with front-row seats: Donning your finest eveningwear is perhaps not recommended.) Despite the limited amount of space Stinson had to cavort in, it was five minutes of bliss, and on Thursday, a much-

needed

five minutes, as Lockwood's rain dance was one of the few sequences in the whole of Act I that really worked at all.

It's not that the show was devoid of pleasures. There were a few first-rate supporting performances, and some lively dances, and we heard many of the songs and hysterical patches of dialogue that help make the film version so legendary. (My personal favorite line:

Silent-screen dimwit Linda Lamont screeching, "I make more money than Calvin Coolidge! *Put together*

!") Excepting a few numbers, though, I find the theatrical version of *Singin' in the Rain*

to be a mostly lifeless and lumpy thing; as with many film-to-stage transfers, scenes that zip by in a flash on screen are static and unconvincing when performed without the benefits of editing and camera movement. And even if the material were

stronger, Thursday evening's production would still (and sadly) have been plagued with a series of spirit-crushing technical gaffes, accidents, and, I thought, considerable errors in judgment.

Some of the goofs were no doubt one-time-only mishaps - such as the cream pie that failed to find its victim's face when thrown from three feet away - and a few of the problems, God willing, may well have been ironed out by the time you read this. I pray, at least, that the kinks have been worked out of the projection system. Numerous scenes here are dependent on characters watching film footage, but on Thursday, these videotaped segments were (a) badly positioned, allowing you to only view the top half of the images on the screen; (b) badly illuminated, making the images hard to see, and the silent-movie captions *really* hard to see; and (c) practically inaudible. [At one point, there was even a (d), when a video glitch caused Horton's off-screen singing to be comically, unintentionally out of sync with Claire Barnhart's

on

-screen singing.]

The tech in these sequences was a mess, but hopefully a *fixable* mess. I'm not, however, certain that anything can be done to make the scenic shifts less clunky, or less terrifying.

Composed of a series of sliding flats painted to resemble brick walls,

Singin' in the Rain

's set, to be blunt, looks like something of a deathtrap; actors would drag these immense pieces

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from one side of the stage to the other, and when you weren't worried that the precariously-balanced flats would tumble at a moment's notice, you were concerned about the performer/stagehands accidentally bashing into one another. (The show's design seemed unnecessarily complicated, as one brick-laden locale didn't appear noticeably different from another.)

Then there were the unfortunate staging choices. Chief among them: *Singin' in the Rain* finds actors routinely entering from one of the theatre's aisles, but because of the nature of the Showboat's design, performers can only get on-stage by first ducking their heads, to avoid conking them on the underside of the balcony seating. No one's noggin was harmed on Thursday, thank goodness, but you held your breath during every stage-left entrance and exit, and there was a

lot of breath-holding; during Stinson's and Horton's first duet, even random passers-by were forced into using this awkward aisle entrance, leading us to care less about Don's and Kathy's flirtation than about potential cranial injuries.

And while it pains me to say it, I might've been able to overlook nearly all of these flaws if *Singin' in the Rain*

had presented us with a truly winning pair of romantic leads. Yet despite their natural and considerable gifts, the miscast Stinson and Horton aren't that pair. Both are excellent dancers and fine actors, and I've adored them in plenty of previous Showboat productions. In this role, though, Stinson doesn't exude the light-hearted charisma necessary to take our minds off Gene Kelly - his focus is so intense while hoofing that he almost looks stricken with pain - and his vocals are sometimes distractingly off-pitch. Horton, meanwhile, is as endearing a presence as she always is, but with all due respect, there's just no getting around the fact that her ingénue reads as a good decade-plus older than any of her fellow chorus girls. I applaud the (idea of the) unconventional casting, and Horton gives the character a fine shot, but she's all wrong for it, and she and Stinson don't provide much in the way of romantic rapport; they are to their roles what the

Singin' in the Rain

stage version is to its cinematic counterpart.

But at least it rained. And at least the ensemble sings and smiles with exuberance and charm. And at least there are several big talents providing expert supporting turns: Joshua Sohn, delivering a stunner of a show-stopping routine with his tireless, physics-defying performance of "Make 'Em Laugh"; Barnhart, whose Lina Lamont is a delectable dim-bulb with a riotous squawk of a voice; Drew Simendinger, whose vocals on his "Beautiful Girls" solo are as appealing as his dry-comic wit and exquisite moves on "Moses Supposes."

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And at least there's tap dancing. *Glorious* tap dancing. Choreographed by Julia Mitchell and the multi-hyphenate Stinson, a couple of *Singin' in the Rain*'s dances are even more thrilling than the on-stage rain, and whenever the performers are allowed to really go to town - as they do most enjoyably on "Broadway Melody" - their dexterous moves, combined with those divinely satisfying sounds, fill you with a happiness that few experiences in theatre can match. I left the Showboat's latest more than a little disappointed, but every once in a while, for a few minutes, I was in heaven; at its best, the show suggests that on the eighth day, God created tap, and He saw that it was good.

For tickets and information, call (563)242-6760 or visit ClintonShowboat.org.