

Knocking 'em Dead: "Curtains," at the Prospect Park Auditorium through August 15

Written by Thom White

Monday, 09 August 2010 06:00

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Curtains is potentially the only whodunit show I actually like. It certainly doesn't hurt that it's a Fred Ebb & John Kander musical, with catchy, singable songs. And it certainly helps that Quad City Music Guild's production is well-sung, well-acted, and maintains the show's oddball quality without taking it over the top.

It's director Wayne Hess who keeps it that way, not allowing his cast to move too much into camp territory. His *Curtains* is sweetly goofy with a believable edge to it, and no one yuks it up merely for the sake of a laugh. Instead, the cast earned the audience's laughter during Friday night's performance by playing it big, but not *too* big, and playing it funny, but without the self-awareness of *being*

funny, something that often turns a production into something pretentious or superficial. This musical murder mystery also provides enough clues that allow the audience to legitimately try to solve the case of who's murdering the cast, crew, and producers the Broadway-bound musical *Robbin' Hood of the Old West*

. (I like that, as too many whodunits don't allow the audience to play along, keeping them on the outside of the experience rather than feeling that they're a part of it.)

The murderer's first victim, here, is a great loss - not to the play's characters, but to the audience - because Stephanie Seward is so delightfully good as Jessica Crenshaw, the fading film star headlining *Robbin' Hood*. Crenshaw can't act and can't sing, but she can dance... just not in pace with the music. And Seward is so crowd-pleasingly fine as this bad actress that it's a shame she only has one scene - though at least that scene, *Curtains*

first, sets the stage for what's to come in the form of polished performances just as entertaining

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as hers.



Mark McGinn has the honor of taking the musical's lead as Lieutenant Frank Cioffi, the officer investigating Crenshaw's murder. McGinn isn't excessively dynamic in the role, instead playing it in a likable, even-handed style that reminded me of Dick Van Dyke in manner and speech (though minus the quirky physical humor). McGinn is countered by Andrea Millea as Niki Harris, Cioffi's potential love interest, and while she, too, isn't that nuanced, she maintains a delightful naïveté and sweetness throughout the show.

There's not much sweetness in Wendy Czekalski's performance as Carmen Bernstein, *Robbin' Hood's* co-producer; she's bawdy and brazen as she belts out some of *Curtains'*

funniest songs. Czekalski has a knack for getting the most out of the humor in her lines, and while her character's jokes are the show's cheesiest, Czekalski takes the cheese out of them, turning them into brassy bits of laughter-inducing one-liners by not attempting to be funny. (That's to say, her character doesn't seem to be trying to make a joke - she's just one of those people who speak their minds, loudly, and happen to be hilarious while doing it.)

While Czekalski's Carmen is smart and powerful, Cara Chumbley's Bambi Bernet is dim-witted but driven. Chumbley manages to bob her head and shout her lines in stereotypical dumb-blonde fashion without making Bambi just another blonde joke. And Chumbley maintains Bambi's self-important air even while only in the background on stage; she turns an easily unlikable character into one that's somehow *charmingly* self-centered.

Tom Vaccaro is deliciously venomous as *Boston Globe* critic Daryl Grady, while Shana Lavino incorporates the right amount of self-doubt into Georgia Hendricks to make her relatable, someone you want to cheer on to success in both love and performance. (Her lyricist character is forced into taking over the role of *Robbin' Hood's* leading lady.) It tickles me pink every time I see Mark Ruebling walk onto a stage; while his typically engaging eccentricity is absent here as *Robbin' Hood* co-producer Sidney Bernstein, Ruebling's performance is no less unforgettable.

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