

Written by Thom White

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There's one thing that appears missing from Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's *Sunday in the Park with George*

: adequate rehearsal time. Actually, there are a number of things partially absent in this offering - polished performances, accurate notes, emotion - but they all stem from what seems to have been not enough time to adequately prepare the piece. To quote lyrics from the show, "art isn't easy," but it's certainly easier than prepping a Stephen Sondheim production in two weeks.

That's mostly unfortunate for Michael Detmer, who plays 19th-Century artist Georges Seurat (a.k.a. George) in Sondheim's

fictionalized account of the artist behind the painting
A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte

. Detmer - who was fantastic as Huck Finn in the Showboat's previous musical,

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Big River -

seemed a bit lost during Saturday night's performance, as if he was struggling to make sure he got the wordy, fast-paced lyrics right. And due to this apparent uncertainty, he seemed unable, at least in the first act, to fully flesh out his character.

There are brief glimpses of life in Detmer's portrayal, particularly as he connects with his character's mother in the song "Beautiful," but that's the second-to-last number in Act I. Up to that point, Detmer pretty much depicts George as flat, emotionless, and blank, with little to no nuance. There's a bigger spark of Detmer's potential found in Act II, when he's playing Seurat's great-grandson, a 20th-Century artist. The actor's Act II George has heart and connects with the other characters... until, that is, he hits the song "Putting It Together," which Detmer performs without feeling and with a deer-in-the-headlights look; again, he seems overly concerned about getting through the song without messing up the lyrics. It's a shame, because I've enjoyed Detmer in his previous roles this summer, and I know he could do George justice were he allowed more time to fine-tune his approach.

The rest of the cast could have used more time with music director Thea Engelson. (On Saturday, a majority of the harmonies were off to a cringe-worthy degree.) This was apparent in Act I's closing number, "Sunday," which is so movingly poetic and beautifully composed that it usually gives me goosebumps. Without tight harmonies, however, the entire song falls as flat as some of the notes that were sung on Saturday, and several times throughout the show's performance, I also noted the accompanists being forced to catch up to actors - Detmer especially - who were speeding through Sondheim's rhythms.

While there are problems with *Sunday* that could be corrected given more time, there is also a lot that's right about the Showboat's show, chief among them director and set designer Patrick Stinson's staging. Stinson makes particularly great use of a scrim that's bordered by three increasingly larger white frames surrounding the stage; images are projected on the scrim as if it were George's canvas, and eventually - with Stinson positioning his cast both in front of and behind it - the scrim becomes the Seurat masterpiece that inspired the musical. (The effect is fascinating and clever, likely inspired by the 2008 Broadway revival of Sondheim's musical, which relied heavily upon video screens.)

Nicole Horton's turns as both Dot and Marie are also memorable, with Dot the actress' most remarkable portrayal during her summer spent on the Showboat stage. Horton hits all the right notes, not only in creating an amusing and endearing character with a welcome humorous edge, but also vocally, as she's pitch-perfect from beginning to end. And she hits the right *physical* notes, too; in Act II, Horton impressively incorporates the use of trembling hands while portraying the elderly, wheelchair-bound grandmother Marie, an affectation she maintains consistently.

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On the whole, the Showboat's *Sunday in the Park with George* is a cleverly staged piece that suffers from a sense of being *ru*
shed

to the stage. And that's too bad; given more rehearsal time, the musical could've been my personal favorite rendering of, arguably, Sondheim's most personal piece.

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

Thom White covers entertainment news for WQAD Quad Cities News 8.