

River City's Leader: "The Music Man," at the Prospect Park Auditorium through August 14

Written by Thom White
Monday, 08 August 2011 06:00



Christopher Thomas could sell me anything. On Thursday night, he was peddling the character of Harold Hill in a preview performance of Quad City Music Guild's *The Music Man*, and Thomas plays the part with such bombastic charm – and just a hint of smarm – that despite knowing of the character's swindling intentions, I was buying his Hill's shtick hook, line, and sinker, right along with the good people of River City.

Director Harold Truitt's treatment of the Meredith Willson musical about a con man who dupes a small Iowa town is fun, uplifting, and has a feel of nostalgia. And while Truitt's production doesn't effectively address the show's deeper themes, that hardly matters, because it's so gosh-darn enjoyable. This work has the air of the feel-good show many people probably remember it as, even though the plot is actually somewhat seedy.

The lack of darker elements here lies in the absence of growth in the townsfolk and, to a lesser degree, the main characters. At the musical's core, the hero is anything but noble – at least at the beginning. Initially, Hill has nothing but ill intent in mind for the innocent people of River City, and part of the beauty of Willson's creation is the juxtaposition of this shady man against the backdrop of small-town purity and goodness. Seeing a swindler pull the wool over the eyes of such honest, uncorrupted folk and take them for all their worth is not happy, fun stuff. But the depth of Willson's plot lies in how Hill's evil actions actually change the River Citizens, and how they, in turn, change him.



In Truitt's production, though, there isn't a sense that the people have changed for the better due to Hill's sway over them. Instead, they just seem to be taken by Hill's flattery and join a dance group or a band at his suggestion, but might have done the same at *anyone's* push to do so. It's obvious that Hill's use of honeyed words is a distraction for these people, but not necessarily a life-changing one.

Yet while I, personally, appreciate Willson's show for its less-than-sweet aspects, I don't mind

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that they're missing from Truitt's piece. The cast members in his chorus are an amiable ensemble with a sense of community emanating from them whenever they gather on the stage; they seem to be thoroughly enjoying themselves and, consequently, it's easy to enjoy *The Music Man*

along with them. The school-board barbershop quartet possesses this smooth, easygoing friendliness, which backs up their rich harmonies, and the town's ladies mix bumbling buffoonery with a soft form of snobbery as they gossip, dance delightfully poorly, and display costume designer Peggy Freeman's gorgeous creations (particularly her stunning hats). The show's kids, too, work well as a group, with wide-eyed wonder and small-town wholesomeness evident in their expressive faces and exaggerated excitement.

On a more individualized level, Erika Thomas' primly intellectual Marian Paroo is a fine foil for (real-life husband) Christopher Thomas' Hill. Her Marian is consistent in character and doesn't melt for Hill all at once; instead, Erika takes her time softening Marian's opinion of Hill. When she does finally take that last step and fall for him, it's clear that this Marian is more infatuated, and thrilled with the experience, than suddenly in love. (While there's a hint that she *could* fall in love with this man given more time together, we also see that she's smart enough to understand the circumstances of their relationship, and able to walk away should she have to forget Hill.) When the two sing "Till There Was You" together, their affection is palpable as their beautifully entwined voices carry a heart-melting sentiment.



Scott Tunnicliff's odd choices for mid-sentence pauses help make his Mayor Shinn a crowd favorite, and his almost-constant shouting and scripted word mix-ups are among the funniest parts of Music Guild's production. He's matched in hilarity only by Heidi Pedersen's performance as Shinn's wife, Eulalie, whose humor is almost entirely delivered through her vocal inflections, with these amusingly absurd waves of pitch that are most notable in her guttural-sounding "*Balzac!*" delivery in the "Pickalittle" number. I don't recall either of these two delivering a single line that didn't elicit laughter from Thursday's audience.

Rebecca Schaechter has an exceptionally funny moment in her first scene, when she teases Winthrop for his lisp with a nasty, taunting "*Amaryllith! Amaryllith!*", and then stands up straight and tall and flatly says, "He's crying," as if she can't fathom

why

. (Schaechter is especially notable for, as I was told, having stepped into her Amaryllis role on the Friday before the show's opening.) As for Winthrop himself, Spencer Clark's lisp is

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impressively consistent throughout the piece, which is especially important for the song "Gary, Indiana," which Clark sings with remarkable projection and youthful charm.

Truitt's production, overall, is quite charming itself, as he plays up the sweetness of the piece and sets the shadiness of it aside. Still, what Music Guild's *The Music Man* lacks in depth, it more than makes up for in sentiment and laughs.

For tickets and information, call (309)762-6610 or visit QCMusicGuild.com.