

Written by Mike Schulz  
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Among *Bye Bye Birdie*'s signature numbers is the show-tune staple "Put on a Happy Face," and barring one intentionally, gloriously sour exception, the cast for the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's winning and energetic production of this Broadway warhorse has done just that.

I only wish the joviality on display at director Tommy lafrate's opening-night performance was enough to override my personal lukewarm feelings toward *Bye Bye Birdie* itself, one of the few musical comedies from Broadway's golden era that I kind of wish had *remained*

there. Inspired by the media frenzy that followed Elvis Presley's 1957 Army induction, the show finds rock-and-roll icon Conrad Birdie (played here, with egomaniacal panache, by Anthony Sagaria) sent to Sweet Apple, Ohio, for a publicity stunt arranged by his agent Albert (Brian Cowing). Commissioned to bestow a farewell kiss on one lucky fan, on live TV, before heading overseas, Conrad arrives, and his presence immediately turns the sleepy burg upside-down. The sullen star's many fans – not all of them youths, and not all of them female – shriek and swoon, teens turn against parents, parents rail against teens, and budding romances are thwarted, not least being Albert's courtship with his loyal secretary Rosie (Monique Abry).

But does any of this *matter*? The last time I saw *Bye Bye Birdie*, in any form, was when I was 12, and beyond its narrative and more recognizable songs (the title tune, "A Lot of Livin' to Do," that zippy tirade "Kids"), I couldn't recall a thing about it prior to my Showboat visit. I'm now thinking that had nothing to do with faulty memory or age-related brain-cell loss. A bunch of characters tumble in and out of the show, yet nothing that happens to them seems of any consequence, mostly because

*Bye Bye Birdie*

seems to view every figure with the same mildly satirical disregard: The rock star is an arrogant mope, the teens are vacuous and silly, and the adults are mostly stodgy and clueless. Of course, there's nothing wrong with a production wanting to deliver happy, throwaway diversion. Throwaway diversion, though, is really all you get here, and while that's fine for the musical's first half, by its second, when it appears we're actually supposed to *care*

whether the leads get their Happily Ever After, the determined insouciance of it all makes that a tall order.

This, however, is hardly the fault of Cowing and Abry, two hardworking pros whose friendly, easygoing charm and considerable song-and-dance skills make their limited roles quite

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appealing. (After the Showboat's recent *Into the Woods*, it's both amusing and satisfying to see that production's Baker and Cinderella continuing their tentative union here.) And while *Bye Bye Birdie* is cornball even by the standards of its 1958 setting, lafrate and his game cast embrace the show's stylized, gee-whiz earnestness with ingratiating vigor.

I fell a bit in love with Taylor Wiebers when, as a high-school sophomore, the vocally gifted actor played a heartbreakingly sweet Sandy in Quad City Music Guild's 2010 *Grease*. (It was a completely chaste love-from-afar, I promise.) Wiebers' spirited Kim MacAfee here is just as endearing a creation – never funnier than when unintentionally pointing out the irony in her 15-year-old's "How Lovely to Be a Woman" solo – and Derreck Bertram and Noah Strausser portray teenage goobers with unembarrassed glee. As for Carolyn Hopkins, in the role of the almost

*angerously* obsessive Conrad Birdie fan Ursula, her pop-eyed hysteria and fearless physical gusto make the character's too-few scenes cackle-worthy riotous. (If anyone's casting a musical-comedy adaptation of

*Misery*, Hopkins might be your go-to gal.) These youths, and the numerous Showboat ensemble members portraying

*Bye Bye Birdie*'s other teens, seem to relish performing choreographer Cowing's more exuberant dance moves, and with numbers as joyously well-staged as the clever, kicky "The Telephone Hour," who wouldn't? Yet in lafrate's inspiringly cheerful production, there's equal relish on display even among those who steadfastly

*refuse* to dance.

Nicely partnered by Erica Vander Velde's Mrs. MacAfee – whose quietly awestruck response to Conrad's soda guzzling is the show's best visual gag – Doug Kutzli's Mr. MacAfee is sensationally unhinged, hitting peaks of high dudgeon reminiscent of John Lithgow in his *3rd Rock from the Sun*

days. And earning best-in-show honors for her Mae Peterson, a character who neither dances *nor*

sings, the madly inventive Steph Garrett takes the nagging-Jewish-mama stereotype to rarely glimpsed levels of explosive stage comedy; by Garrett's final exit, every single word uttered by the grim-faced harridan Mae felt drenched in guilt-laden hilarity. In

*Bye Bye Birdie*

's musical-comedy *battle royale*

## The Pied Piper of Sweet Apple, Ohio: "Bye Bye Birdie," at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre through July

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between the pop-culture-obsessed kids and the uncomprehending adults, I'm happy to report that, in terms of the Showboat's performance, both sides emerge victorious.

*Bye Bye Birdie runs at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre (311 Riverview Drive, Clinton) through July 15, and information and tickets are available by calling (563)242-6760 or visiting [ClintonShowboat.org](http://ClintonShowboat.org)*