Written by Thom White
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Quad City Music Guild's *Hello, Dolly!* seems something of a self-parody, as director Erin Lounsberry amps up the silliness of the piece, reveling in the fun of it rather than taking this story of the matchless matchmaker too seriously. It's Lounsberry's almost campy approach that makes the production worth seeing, with Tristan Layne Tapscott and Bryan Tank carrying much of its wacky weight.

Tapscott's Cornelius Hackl and Tank's Barnaby Tucker are the highlights of Music Guild's performance, taking playwright Michael Stewart's book and composer/lyricist Jerry Herman's songs to delightfully ridiculous heights. The pair are like Martin & Lewis, except they're both playing the dimwitted, clumsy Jerry Lewis – they're Lewis & Lewis-er. Thursday's preview performance was at its most enjoyable whenever these two actors were on stage, which, thankfully, was a lot, as their store clerks orchestrate a rare day off so that they can make a trip to New York, refusing to leave until they've each kissed a girl.

Tapscott and Tank are backed by an equally energetic, and almost as funny, ensemble of men that brought Thursday's house down with the "It Takes a Woman" number and the second act's dinner sequence, the latter of which found waiters rushing around with loaded trays of food and drinks. (These two scenes also showcased choreographer Karen Lasley's finest work, with the humorous moves and footwork in “It Takes a Woman” particularly good.) Among the show's male ensemble, Joe Maubach is especially fun to watch, as he almost constantly finds moments to express his humor through facial expressions and body language. During the titular number, for example, Charlene Skripsky Engstrom's Dolly sings the line "You look great, Stanley! / Lose some weight, Stanley?" to Maubach. In response, the actor, who is a bit on the heavy side, looks at Engstrom with a dumbfounded expression that reads as "Are you serious?", then looks at his belly, and then looks out to the audience, as if to say, "Is this woman off her rocker?!" Hilarious!

Unfortunately, "off her rocker" may be a more accurate suggestion of Engstrom's performance than it should be. Engstrom's Dolly seems more eccentric and flighty than the confident, manipulatively meddling matchmaker she's written to be, and her characterization wasn't aided

by the actor's apparent uncertainty over her lines throughout Thursday's performance. (I caught at least one instance in which a castmate had to feed Engstrom a line by asking her a question that contained part of her scripted sentence in it, and suspected several more instances of this throughout the show.) The only time Engrstrom seemed confident was during her songs, and she *should* be confident about them, as the performer can sing quite well. Here, however, her Dolly seems less a puppet-master than a marionette on loose strings.

In addition to Engstrom's problematic performance, her character is also costumed in the least interesting dresses in the show, with designers Peggy Freeman Knudsen and Cathy Marsoun clothing the ensemble's women in more ornate, gorgeous, and better-fitted dresses than Dolly (which, regarding this musical, seems a theatrical sin).

Its title character aside, and in addition to Tapscott's and Tank's performances, there is plenty to enjoy in Lounsberry's piece. Mike Millar's Horace Vandergelder – the general-store owner who catches the eye of Dolly – is like that crotchety uncle whose acerbic nature is easy to find funny, with the actor showcasing adept comic delivery beneath his crusty façade. Portraying Horace's daughter, Kaitlyn Wehr delightfully overplays her crying Ermengarde, delivering hilariously dramatic sobs. Susie Carsell-Schaechter's hat-store owner Irene Molloy is a nice balance of almost uppity poise and approachable refinement, which is most notable in her "Ribbons Down My Back" solo, as she delights in modeling a beautiful hat as though she's in touch with her inner child, proudly playing dress-up. Allyson Martens' bubbly Minnie Fay never once drops her infectiously joyful attitude. And Stephanie Schultz makes an especially memorable appearance as the crass prostitute Ernestina, whom Horace mistakes as his chosen bride-to-be.

The cast's performances take place against several beautiful sets by designer Harold Truitt. His general store is particularly interesting for its large shelf loaded with carefully arranged and well-balanced baskets, half barrels, horse-riding gear, milk bottles, and other period items. Truitt's fancy restaurant Harmonia Gardens, however, is flat-out jaw-dropping when the curtain opens to reveal a short staircase covered in lush, deep-red carpet, rising to a landing bordered with a railing of short Greek pillars connected by ornate iron panels.

While I do hope to see Engstrom in future productions (she'd make an exceptional Jack's Mother in *Into the Woods*), her Dolly didn't have me wanting to say "hello" to Quad City Music Guild's *Hello, Dolly!* Fortunately, Tapscott and Tank – and the rest of

the cast, the sets, and (most of) the costumes – did. Maybe the title should've been changed to *Hello, Cornelius and Barnaby!*
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Hello, Dolly! *runs at the Prospect Park Auditorium (1584 34th Avenue, Moline) through August 12, and information and tickets are available by calling (309)762-6610 or visiting QCMusicGuild.com*
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