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The Fantasticks

Good People Theater Company at Lillian Theater

Reviewed by Neal Weaver



Matt Stevens, Matt Franta, Christopher Karbo, Alex Rikki Ogawa, Audrey Curd, and Michael P. Wallot

When this modest little musical, with book and lyrics by Tom Jones and music by Harvey Schmidt, first opened Off-Broadway in 1960, no one could have predicted the astonishing success it would achieve. It ran for a grand 42 years, racking up an astronomical 17,162 performances, and has since been performed all over the world.

The show was loosely adapted from an old play, *The Romanticks*, by that arch-romantic Edmond Rostand, creator of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. If, as Thornton Wilder observed, art is the orchestration of clichés, this is a prime example. Most of the jokes—dealing with the follies and foibles of young lovers, and the scheming of ambitious parents—were old when Shakespeare was a pup. But they always seem to reap rich laughter from audiences, as they do here.

The plot is simple in this gentle and genial satire on romantic illusions like “perfect love” and “happily ever after.” Despite the opposition of their fathers and the wall that separates his garden and hers, Matt (Matt Franta) and Luisa (Audrey Curd) have fallen in love. But there’s more to this than meets the eye. The two fathers, Huckleby (Matt Stevens) and Bellomy (Michael P. Wallot) actually want the two to fall in love and marry. But knowing that the young always seem to defy their elders, the two have built the wall to create an obstacle and invented a feud between them, so the kids can think they’re rebelling. Now, however, the fathers must find a way to end the feud. They hire a passing vagabond, El Gallo (Christopher Karbo), to stage an abduction of Luisa, from which Matt can gallantly rescue her. And in the resulting celebration, they can end their war and the lovers can be married. So ends Act 1.

In Act 2, disillusionment sets in, starting with the very first song: “This Plum Is Too Ripe.” Perfect love is hard to sustain, and soon the parents are really feuding over their respective gardening techniques. Matt and Luisa learn about the deception of their fathers and have a serious falling out. Matt decides to venture out alone to see what the great world is like.

The authors have crafted a passle of lovely melodies to balance the comedy, including “Try To Remember” and “Soon It’s Gonna Rain,” and equally effective comic songs, including “When You Plant a Radish (You Get A Radish)” —unlike children who may turn out quite unexpectedly.

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Director-choreographer Janet Miller has said that she wanted to recapture the fun of the original production, and in that she is quite successful. But earlier productions have done a bit more than that and carried the disillusion further. The song “Round and Round,” sung by Luisa and El Gallo, began to echo Luisa’s desperation, while the return of the bruised and disillusioned Matt from his adventures achieved pathos, defusing the show’s potential cutesiness. The success of the piece has always depended on its ability to tread the fine line between the sweet and the saccharine. And thus there were obstacles to overcome before the bittersweet ending.

Karbo captures the dash and cynical wisdom of El Gallo, and has the vocal chops to score with his songs. Franta and Curd provide the requisite charm and naiveté of the young lovers, and Stevens and Wallot supply the style, skill, and *savoir faire* of a music-hall team as the two fathers. They are ably supported by Alex Rikki Ogawa as the Kabuki-style stage manager. Joey D’Auria shines as the Old Actor hired to assist El Gallo in the abduction, and Corky Loupe contributes further comedy as Mortimer, the actor who specializes in dying.

Corey Hirsch provides sparkling musical direction, and Jillian Risigari-Gai lends elegance as the harpist. Robert Schroeder created the engagingly simple set, and Kathy Gillespie is responsible for the colorful costumes.

June 9, 2014

June 6-29. 1076 Lillian Way, Hollywood.
See website for schedule. Running time 2
hours, including intermission. \$10-20.

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