

Review - 'Forum' scores with laughs galore

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Opera House Theatre Co. closes its 30th anniversary season – and its first without founder and artistic director Lou Criscuolo, who died in December – with the 1962 musical comedy “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum,” which runs at Thalian Hall through Sunday.

Pairing a feather-light story lifted from the Roman playwright Plautus (it's punched up by the writing team of Larry Gelbart and Burt Shevelove) with some of the most trifling, but still pretty, songs Stephen Sondheim ever wrote, “Forum” doesn't make pretensions about being anything more than pure entertainment. It's directed by Anthony Lawson, who draws out much of the script's ample humor to create several laugh-out-moments, while letting the songs, which range from bawdy romps to romantic throwaways, have their moments.

It's a fun time, and a celebratory end to Opera House's season.

Steering this comedy ship is Troy Rudeseal, who plays the show's leading man, the liberty-desiring slave Psuedolus. “I should be whipped, gently,” Psuedolus tells his young master, Hero, lightly rebuking himself for the impudence of asking for his own freedom. Fittingly, Rudeseal's tongue-tripping performance of the song “Free” is quite good.

“Better a slave than a slave to love,” sighs Hero, the dreamy son of a Senator, who's played with a genial cluelessness by Paul Teal. Hero's desire sets in motion a plot in which Psuedolus, in order to win his freedom, must lure the object of his master's affection – a beautiful but betrothed courtesan named Philia (Arianna Torello, effortlessly funny and lovely of voice) -- from the neighboring, ill-reputed house of Marcus Lycus (Jim Bowling, entertainingly unctuous) and into Hero's arms.

Outfitted in a sporty blue-and-orange getup by Juli Harvey – the costume designer runs the gamut from simple togas to the dominatrix-style attire of the towering courtesan Gymnasia, who's given a riveting placidity by Tammy Sue Daniels -- Rudeseal plays it fast and hard. He builds to an impressive display of physical comedy in the second act that coincides with the play's own cavalcade of hilarity as the increasingly complicated events come to a head during a wild, rousing finale that's the best part of the show.

Getting there is also enjoyable thanks to some excellent performances and music director Lorene Walsh's band, which accents the comedy while carrying Sondheim's melodious tunes.

Curtis Campbell gets huge laughs as the browbeaten Senex, Hero's father, who



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The cast of Opera House Theatre Co.'s production of “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.” Back row, from left: Curtis Campbell as Senex, Chris Rickert as Miles Gloriosus, Tammy Sue Daniels as Gymnasia, Arianna Torello as Philia, Kim Ewonus as Erronnius and Paul Teal as Hero. Bottom row, from left: Brad Mercier as Hysterium, Jim Bowling as Marcus Lycus and Troy Rudeseal as Psuedolus.

because of a misunderstanding thinks he's got a chance to "sow my last wild oat" with Philia. He also shares a charming duet, "Impossible," with Teal as father and son try to convince themselves that the other doesn't have eyes for Philia. Cindy Colucci is fantastically funny as Domina, Hero's mother and Senex's dominating wife, and she shows off her estimable pipes during "That Dirty Old Man," a takedown of/love letter to her husband.

Hero's song "Love, I Hear" is beautifully sung by Teal, and despite its confectionery nature one can hear the playful seeds of what would grow in complexity to become Sondheim's signature style. ("Forum" is the first Broadway show Sondheim wrote the music for.)

As the excitable slave Hysterium, Brad Mercier delivers an impressive falsetto in the reprise of "Lovely"; Chris Rickert brings a regal pomposity to the Roman soldier Miles Gloriosus, who's supposed to marry Philia; and Kim Ewonus nearly steals the show as Erronius, the elderly neighbor of Senex and Lycus.

Lycus' stable of courtesans adds a lot, with Beth Swindell ringing bells during a fabulous dance as Tintinabula and Cameron Corbett showing off impressive athleticism as the catlike Vibrata. A trio of Proteans – Jason Aycock, Anna Gamel and Michael Robinson – do yeomens' work in numerous parts.

Several numbers are underwhelming, and opportunities for laughs are missed here and there. When "Forum" hits, though, it's a gut punch producing involuntary laughter, which is always the best kind.

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