

# A GREAT VOICE OF AMERICA: Opera House produces splendid show, 'The Will Rogers Follies'

AUG 9 • ARTSY SMARTSY, FEATURE SIDEBAR, THEATER • NO COMMENTS ON A GREAT VOICE OF AMERICA: OPERA HOUSE PRODUCES SPLENDID SHOW, 'THE WILL ROGERS FOLLIES'

Opera House Theatre Company just wrapped "1776." Now, in further patriotic and election-themed shows, they're offering "The Will Rogers Follies" on the Main Stage of Thalian Hall. With a book by Peter Stone (also of "1776" fame) and a score by Cy Coleman, accompanied by lyrics from Betty Comden and Adolph Green ("Singin' in the Rain"), it is, like Will Rogers himself, incredibly memorable and enjoyable.



*MAN OF THE HOUR: Jason Aycock as Will Rogers pulls off a fascinating performance in latest show about one of America's finest political pundits. Photo by Erik Maasch.*

There are few artists who have had quite the profound and lasting impact on human discourse as Will Rogers. Though no longer the household name he once was, his work has influenced generations since, leaving markers that even millennials would recognize. The "Cowboy Philosopher" basically created the platform John Stewart utilized on "The Daily Show" (albeit Stewart played it with a sophisticated twist and Rogers' hallmark was that he was a simple working man).

The show utilizes the structure of a Ziegfeld Follies show, which Rogers headlined early in his time in New York. Mr. Ziegfeld (Jeff Phillips) directs the show from above, periodically moving people and pieces to make it more of a Ziegfeld Follies format. Of course, there are lots of big dance numbers utilizing Follies Girls, incredibly beautiful, talented, young women that you would follow anywhere as long as they are doing high kicks: Wiler Ballantine, Carli Batson, Andi Creech, Ava Eller, Sky Gibbs, Alexandra Henderson, Avery Hoederman, Emmalee Hutchinson, Audrey Penneys, Beth Swindell, Skylar Vanderharr, and Kendall Walker), all led by Ziegfeld's featured favorite, Tammy Sue Daniels. They're nicely complemented by Wranglers, a.k.a. male eye-candy to balance it out a bit, (Bradley Barefoot, Gregory Beddingfeild, Blaine Allen Mower, Christopher Rickert). "Will-a-Mania," the big number to introduce the star himself, manages to get every ounce of big-production-number musical excess that the Follies were known for and they thrill the audience at every turn. It's quite a lead up to an entrance.

Jason Aycock has some pretty big shoes to fill depicting Will Rogers. Boyish grin? Check. Good natured charm? Check. Singing? Check. Dancing? Please! Jason Aycock could dance before he could walk. So that leaves the big question: Can he twirl a rope? Because Will Rogers started his career with rope tricks and began that famous patter in between the tricks. Well, not only does Aycock pull off twirling the rope, he even gets the signature trick of jumping in the moving loop and continuing a vertical move while still twirling! Audiences who haven't been charmed by Aycock before the show will be head over heels for him now. He sings and dances his way into everyone's hearts with "Give a Man Enough Rope"—and he does it just like Will did to Betty Blake (Shannon Playl). "I'm not a real movie star. I've still got the same wife I started out with 28 years ago," as Rogers famously referred to the love of his life.

Playl is stunning from her first entrance sitting on a moon. She is filled with strength, determination and pushes Aycock at every turn. This is not an easy role to play. Physical demands (rope tricks, dancing) aside, the conceit of the show is Rogers is hosting a night at the Follies, so he breaks the fourth wall and talks to the audience continuously, while doing his humorist patter. But he still has to be in the scene and play the highs and lows. So we see him delivering a radio speech during the Depression, but also running for president on a mock platform. Losing a child to diphtheria and struggling with being an absentee father. It takes a performer with a tremendous amount of stamina, charisma and craft to pull together all necessary pieces to live up to the legend and keep the show moving forward.

Even when we meet the adorable Rogers children—Quinn Gonzalez, Able Zuckerman, Devon Jones, and Cardier-Princeton Borromeo—there is a shadow hanging over this happy life. Wiley Post (Marlon Ramos), the aviator Rogers died in a plane

with, sits in an opera box, watching the show and waiting. It's a visual reminder coupled with several exchanges of dialogue ("Hey, Will! Let's go flying!") of the intensity with which this life was lived.

If there is anyone onstage who might come close to upstaging the star himself, it is Richard Bunting as Will's dad, Clem Rogers. Partly it is because Clem has got some of the best lines and songs in the show. It begins with him walking around with an infant, crowing that he finally got a boy after six girls. There is a certain element of earthy humor involved, which Bunting plays with complete conviction, making it all the funnier.

Debbie Scheu produces an incredible number of varied and eye-poppingly beautiful costumes. From cowboys to actual cows to jeweled dancers, she and set designer Terry Collins have created a lush and beautiful visual feast.

Will Rogers was one of the great voices America ever produced. Gently and lovingly, he mocked our government and us in way that we could hear the truth behind the joke. Perhaps now more than ever, a dose of down-home common sense wrapped in chuckles is what we need. Opera House has produced a show truly worthy of the late great star and reminds us how lucky we are to not only still have his voice, but have performers here who can mount a production worthy of his memory.

"The Will Rogers Follies" provides a perfect respite from the absurdity of daily life. And it produces much-needed laughs at the end of a tough week—a perfect remedy to cure all your ills.

## **DETAILS:**

### **The Will Rogers Follies**

**August 12-14 and 19-21, 8 p.m. or Sun., 3 p.m.**

**Tickets: \$32**

**Thalian Hall • 310 Chestnut St.**

**(910) 632-2285 • [thalianhall.org](http://thalianhall.org)**