

SUBSTANCE OVER SIZZLE: The creative team of 'City of Angels' brings real and reel worlds to life |

Opera House Theatre Co. closes their season on the Main Stage of Thalian Hall with Cy Coleman and David Zippel's "City of Angels," with the book by "M*A*S*H" co-creator Larry Gelbart.



TYPE AWAY: *Sam Robison as Stine in 'City of Angels.'* Photo by Erik Maasch The show begins with the conceit that a noirish detective film is playing out as Stine, the real-world writer (Sam Robison) pounds away on his typewriter in adapting his book, "City of Angels," to the screen for producer/director Buddy Fidler (Justin Smith). What he types happens before him—just as what he xxx's through un-happens in reverse. That lovely conceit is identified in the program as "The Reel World" and "The Real World." Fans of film noir will appreciate the homage to the genre because if Gelbart can do anything it is write dialogue—and he has the perfect Sam Spade-patter down cold. True to form, the people in Stine's life are the inspiration for the characters that emerge on the page. So his beautiful, intelligent and wronged wife Gabby (Kendra Goehring-Garrett) appears as the torch-singing siren Bobbi in the film world. That anyone could burn and yearn for her is completely believable. Robison's constant failure to live up to the basic request of fidelity to both her and his own promise is a struggle between them that is probably one of the more interesting in the script. Stine's alter ego, Stone (Ken

Griggs), is clearly how Stine would like to see himself. Madness-inducing Buddy Fidler in real life becomes the movie mogul that gets killed off in the reel world. For sheer comic-relief alone the malapropisms that pepper Fidler's dialogue are delightful to watch, and Smith is pitch-perfect as "The Asshole in the Blazer"—i.e. the movie producer in the room. His real-life current wife, Carla (Shannon Playl) is written into the movie as femme fatale Alura Kingsley. She fits the film-noir checklist of the beautiful woman who walks into the PI's office: Irresistible? Check. Probably lying? Check. Definitely trouble? Double check.

There are a variety of moments that make the price of admission worth it. Finding Caitlin Becka naked in his bed is just one among many. But what a moment. Becka is blessed with beauty and sex appeal for days, but she has spent years working on her craft as a performer and she can sell a variety of roles and make them look effortless. As the good-girl-gone-bad (reel world) and the rising young starlet prepared to do anything for her career (real world), she flips back and forth with a joyful abandon that is genuinely wonderful to watch.

Rounding out the female leads that defy film noir's idea that women are only secondary characters and then only problems for the lead is Heather Setzler. In the reel world she is Oolie, long-suffering, strong, right-hand secretary to Stone. In the real world she is Donna, Girl Friday and rainmaker for Buddy Fidler. Her song, "You Can Always Count On Me," in Act Two is the chance to show off her voice but also one of the few numbers in the show that really lets a performer do that. Coleman's score, while a lovely homage to the music of the 1940s, doesn't really cater to the genre of musical theatre very much. He and Zippel have come up with a very creative approach to the material and the time period, but there is nothing memorable or catchy in the score. The cast all sing beautifully and do their best with it, but they really are not given much of an opportunity to use the music as a bridge with the audience, which is one of the roles that music plays in musical theatre. However, Lorene Walsh's band is great because the score is written to be fascinating to musicians. Not only are there really two shows happening with the reel and real worlds conceit, there are also really two separate worlds within the script. Gelbart's rapid-fire dialogue and book could be a stand-alone piece, but Coleman and Zippel's score laid on top of it feels almost like an afterthought. It's frustrating because there are so many amazing voices on that stage. I kept waiting to get the bring-down-the-house number—or even just something catchy to sing along to. But, in spite of the writers, this cast is determined to sell it with everything they can and to see their work is absolutely worth it. I'm just not sure three hours of it is necessary. (It brings to mind one of Buddy's more colorful quips about a circumcision.) To make the reel world even more clearly defined, the design and production team have made everything in it black/white/gray chromatic. So Stone is in a gray suit with gray hair and all the performers wear shades of black and white film. Opera House artistic director Alice Sherwood is always one for details, as is director Ray Kennedy. The design team makes real these details is not a surprise, especially the costumes. Costumer Selina Harvey and hair and makeup designer Sarah Holcomb have really brought the late '40s to each and every performer onstage. Pompadour hair for the women, ashen gray makeup for the movie, and a parade of clothes that go a long way toward removing distance and making the conceit come alive for the audience. The work by the cast and crew is wonderful, and brings to life a creative look at the struggle of an artist caught in an industry machine. That piece hasn't changed much—and the questions the show asks about loyalty, honesty and substance over sizzle are all still important. With a little humor and a lot of joy, this creative team makes that journey come to life.