

THEATRE

Gypsy

Review by Deborah McGee

Gypsy at University Theatre is pretty awesome. My partner liked it best of all we'd seen the last two theater seasons.

It's boisterous and bubbling, tethered always with able theatrical control. Director Jack Watson easily could moonlight as a ring-master. *Gypsy* is as much the story of Gypsy Rose Lee, the 30's burlesque star, as it is the tale of her mother, Rose. Its environment of vaudeville's dying days means plenty of chance for song and dance.

Jerry Williams once again shows wizardry with space and materials, fitting *Gypsy* into Robinson Theatre with perfection. Glittering curlicues and a hot pink backdrop suggest, rather than say, Rose. Upon that pink backdrop, large multi-colored sequins outline the large orange letters G-Y-P-S-Y. Nineteen art deco lights of the time period of the play function as footlights. Williams' sets ooze pizzazz, and just as the play's characters, will do anything to get attention.

Experiencing a musical theater classic such as *Gypsy* always brings the extra joy of re-visiting old tunes, the memories of which are buried back there somewhere among the neurons. "Everything's Coming Up Roses" and "(Funny...) Small World, Isn't It" show that Stephen Sondheim's lyrics/Jule Styne's music have aged well since Broadway audiences first heard them in 1959. At intermission, snatches of "Small World" whistled among mingling theatergoers in the lobby. Memorable tunes.

And so are the characters. Terry Pressler, PhD candidate in theater, plays Rose, mother of the famous striptease artist. Pressler sometimes seems too nice for her crusty character, whom Ethel Mer-man played on Broadway, but we end up being quite drawn to her. She shows great energy and vitality on "This Time I'm Taking the Bows," the musical's rousing applause to persistent human spirit.

Kim Anderson portrays the grown-up Gypsy. Her role is very challenging, for she needs to convey talent hiding beneath a bushel basket, then convincingly unleash

it in an all-plugs-pulled routine. It's a wide array of body language to convey, and Anderson does it well. Among the many other fine production numbers, Jason Buell delivered the hottest hoofing, in a tap dance combined with his own charged vocals.

The rest of the cast and crew are wonderful. There were, in addition, three show-stoppers who made the most of fairly minor roles. They were so deliciously good, and obviously delighted in knowing it, that to mention them might encourage their antics. I must, though, for whenever I think of *Gypsy*, they burst forward.

The audience, too, loved them Saturday night. The trio portray strippers with a gimmick, who teach novice Rose Louise how to bump and grind. Nancy Julian does Electra, chewing gum non-stop, not afraid to show it off, a blase and loony lady with chipmunk voice dressed with as much high-voltage as her name. Karen Gloege as Tessie was all bouncing, swinging pink, purple and magenta, a fairy-like creature who refuses to add dialogue to her strip repertoire, on the grounds of "artistic purity." Absolutely most outrageous of them all is Trisha Will as Mazeppa, looking like Klaus Kinski in drag, a valkyrie all the way down to a marvelous note upon her trumpet. Those three were the epitome of entertainment, in a play about entertainment.

Marzeppa's "note" blended perfectly into a note from the orchestra pit below. Having the live music hidden was fun—for us. We could see heads and violin bows

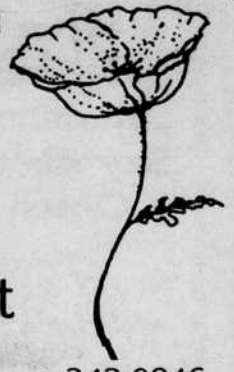
now and then, sometimes director Stephen Stone. Although occasionally it was difficult to hear Rose over the music, timing of the 20 musical numbers with the dances, stage entrances, exits and business of 17 scenes was split-second perfect.

Two Eugene 11-year olds showed astonishing confidence as the young Gypsy and her sister June: Valerie Herkert and Emily Orton. Youthful exuberance was balanced gracefully with talent in their numbers. The entire rest of the cast was tops. Also, Nancy Julian, who seconds as the production's costumer, kept delighting our eyes with her creations. The hot-pink, crinoline, layered dress on Dainty Jane, the shiny blue pants on "The Boys," and the outfits on those three unforgettable strippers were among the most divine.

What most provoked awe, though, was one certain scene. First, a cut-out of a flashy, red coupe of the era enters stage left with the players aboard, all in their youth. They get off one-by-one, as the car continues to stage right and disappears. The players begin to dance. Suddenly, strobe lights hypnotize us a minute or two. Then, that harsh but now constant light shows older versions of the same characters, who have magically replaced the younger ones. Dark silhouettes of the dancers are thrown upon a new backdrop of city skyline—those projected figures seem to join the live ones. After this almost cinematic compression of time and space, the play goes on. Touche.

Once word gets out how good this is, tickets will go fast. If it were a movie, it'd have a PG-13 rating. Nothing offends—it's more flair than flesh, just like the woman of the title. For more specifics, see *What's Happening's* calendar.

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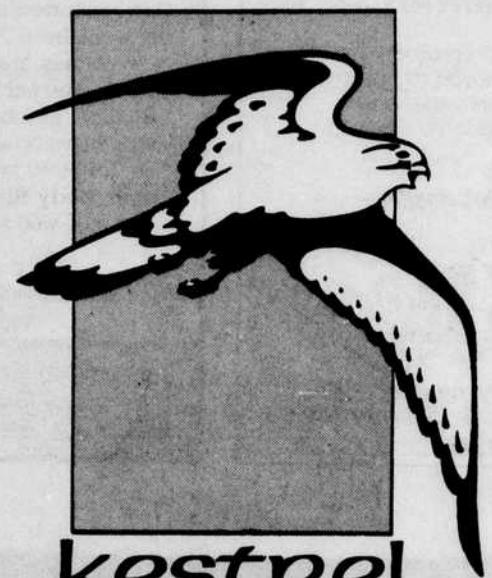
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