

REVIEW

The Chorus expands its repertoire: Or, singing ain't all they do!

by Jim Hunger

Perhaps Pirandello would have come up with something like *Eighty Singers in Search of a Story Line*. Composer and author Tom Simonds, when confronted with the problem of fitting a multitude of male choristers into a musical narrative, hit on the idea of using the U.S. Senate as an appropriate vehicle for the Portland Gay Men's Chorus in *Zillions: or How We Paid Off the National Debt*. And as unmusical as that august governing body seems, the musical works surprisingly well.

Developing a dramatic idea that will accommodate a large cast of characters is itself an intriguing task, but molding a group of generally untrained actors into an effective theatrical experience is a considerable feat indeed. Simonds' accomplishment culminated in the March 17th and 18th performances of *Zillions* by the Chorus and several guest performers.

Ironically, while the idea of a musical comedy focusing on the Senate is fairly successful, the acting of the chorus in unison is one of the weak points of the show. The difficulty lay in having the Chorus arranged in typical performance formation on risers while attempting to convey the image of a group that doesn't operate in this manner. Better actors might have been able to pull it off with convincing body language; a few more props may have helped in this case, perhaps the suggestion of desks, or the impression of a more casual group formation. A few subtle technical effects such as dimming of the lights on the larger group when they weren't directly involved in the main action would have helped keep them out of focal attention and allowed them some undistracting respite.

The harmonic performances of the entire Chorus, however, were always very good, at times superb. Division into baritone conservatives and tenor liberals was an effective device for extracting droll humor from the fundamental dichotomy intrinsic to the Senate. One melodic strain which was particularly appreciated by the audience was a metaphoric rendition of senatorial debate a la

Beachboys.

For the most part, the performances by smaller ensembles were excellent. The Tourists, the Bankers, and the Cabinet were all hilarious during their moments in the limelight. B. Gail Hillyer, Jonathan Squier, Donnie Wayne and Wayne E. Harris were appropriately gawky and gauche as the tourists. The bankers' revelation of their inner desires as contrasted with their actual stern exteriors had the quality of truth to it: Bob Sherwood is effective as the lead banker, and Jim Anctil, Richard Brown, and Bill Liddicoat do well as the other bankers.

The Cabinet, too numerous to mention, were especially entertaining when they were performing their public service advertisement for the cookie sale. The well-sung, obtruding high tenor of the Secretary of Transportation (name withheld), elicited peals of laughter from the audience and Steve Fulmer was properly priggish as the Secretary of State.

While the performances of many individual singers were good, several were very clearly superior. Marty Campbell was excellent in the role of President Pro Tem, capturing the finer nuances necessary to make his own theme song especially amusing, and evoking a touching poignancy in the song "Ohio" which represented the nostalgic feelings of home, wherever that may be. Guest performer Cydre Pidgeon delighted the audience with the most outstanding individual performance of the night, as the sole woman legislator in the Senate. Pidgeon's glorious operatic soprano in her own theme song was truly burlesque at its finest; her acting aplomb assured her the center of attention whenever she was on stage.

Pidgeon and B. Gail Hiller were the only really visible women in the production - an interesting consideration on several levels. The paucity of women's roles further highlighted the wonderful performance of Pidgeon, as did her brightly colored, very feminine attire. While Hillyer's gender made her more visible, the type of yokel character she played tended to deemphasize her sexuality. The dearth of women symbolically underscored the inequitable representation of women in government, and for that matter, in almost every organization in our society. In some ways *Zillions* missed numerous opportunities to accentuate this message: others might feel this is unfair criticism for a comedy musical, but some of the most biting and effective commentary is traditionally disguised in the ludicrous attire of satire. Another weak point in the drama was in its treatment of politics as an appropriate target for satiric ripostes. Although politics was a major source of the comedy, the digs were periodically vague and hence ineffective. In the first scene the Senate votes in bill after bill raising the national deficit, but all of the liberals and all but one of

the conservatives support the bills, which are vague in nature except for the fact that *none* have anything to do with military spending. Several jabs are made at President Reagan, but they tend to be ambiguous, and at one point an oppressive king is brought in as a sort of complication, but this device apparently has no function as a vehicle for commentary.

Zillions also includes two dance routines which are moderately successful. The "Time Goes By" tap dancers are hilarious in their terpsichorean interpretation of the dull passage of time spent waiting, especially when their actions mimic the movement of clocks. The dancing itself is undramatic, in spots, though, with periods of inactivity which, even though they represent waiting, are too long. Steven Poole does a nice job with a number entitled "An American Lullaby," which incorporates some signing into it; however, the piece doesn't fit into the body of the action very well. "Lullaby" is a pleasant, euphonic word, and the American Sign language representation of it is beautifully evocative, but the senators at that point are experiencing something more akin to limbo than lullabies, and so the sense of the song is a bit incongruous.

Zillions, as a whole, provides its audiences with a very entertaining evening of musical and comedic delight. At points both the humor and the music reached transcendent levels which are certain to be remembered with pleasure for some time. I know I personally found myself with some frequency at that stage of uncontrolled guffawing where the hilarity of the moment causes one to forget not to cackle too loudly or with one's mouth wide open. The text of the musical, I think, could use some reworking, a few barbs sharpened here and there, or more included where the opportunity exists but is not taken advantage of. Still, all in all, it was a thoroughly enjoyable night of entertainment.

CINEMA

Improper Conduct

Improper Conduct, a film by Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez Leal, is a documentary consisting of interviews and commentaries by former inmates of Cuban prisons and prison camps. The film is unified by the bitter resentment of all who came in contact with Castro's solution to two problems very high on the Castro family's list of priorities — homosexuality and everything else.

Apparently Raoul Castro, on a trip to Yugoslavia, was favorably impressed by their treatment for homosexuality—prison camp.

Huge concentration camps were set up in Cuba and huge numbers of internees spent time there as slave laborers. Providers of those nominated were the usual ones — those around us. Little guys were turned in because, say, someone else wanted their room in the boarding house. Bigger game were turned in by higher officials who coveted their nice homes. The charges were homosexuality, being hippies (wearing brightly printed shirts, liking the Beatles), extravagance, improper conduct... anything... everything.

Using the old favorite ploy of coaxing each citizen to be his neighbor's keeper by appealing to greed and exploiting the human behavioral component that lends itself so well to enslavement, Castro achieved success in his endeavors efficient in the extreme and thorough. The best method for oppressing a



people still is pitting one neighbor against another.

The world's largest prison (100,000), was built in Cuba by prison inmates. Many more men were imprisoned than women. The woman who told of her four month ordeal in jail (for consorting with writers), told one of the most lurid stories. Possibly this was because fewer women were incarcerated than men, so accommodations were not built and overcrowding was even more excessive.

For women, the changes in spiritual bondage were reflected more in a transmuted form of prostitution, one that mutated to a type tolerable to officials, who knew about it, exploited it. Everything depended on appearances; substance went for nothing.

This film has its applications everywhere in the world, in the past, in the present, and the future. We look upon the devastation of Castro's policies and are appalled. But one male in 40 in Oregon is either in prison, on probation or on parole — his person in hock to the state. We have politicians clamoring to build more prisons so we can put away still more males. Mightn't we be well advised to rework our terms for punishable offenses. Could we think of more meaningful ways for some of these men to pay their debts to society? Is it possible we require a more accurate definition of what men are?

Swann in Love

by Eleanor Malin

Swann In Love is another in the spate of slow-moving period pieces that have become popular since the enormous success of TV's *Brideshead Revisited*. Jeremy Irons, who starred in that mini-series, stars as Swann, the hostile witness to his own restless and destructive love. Handsome, but not macho, Irons is a master at playing well-heeled, spoiled, melancholic heroes.

Swann, son of "reformed" Jews, is wealthy and respectable enough to be received by the upper classes. He regularly makes the rounds with his good friend, Baron Charlus, played by Alain Delon.

But Swann's obsession with a high-class prostitute has derailed him socially. Handsome, wealthy, and charming enough to make a good marriage, instead, he remains addicted to Odette; he can lose his composure in a crowd merely from memories of her bosom. She is beautiful in the manner of a sad-eyed Botticelli drawing. But he tried to avoid having an affair with her, actually thinking her ugly for a time. As often happens, putting off the inevitable merely means that she has had time to stockpile ammunition, and when their affair finally gets off the ground (in broad daylight, in his open coach) he becomes a slave to Odette.

Justlaworks



10% OFF ALL CHAMPAGNE
IN APRIL
WITH THIS AD

Peter de Garmo
Don Oman

3731 S.E. Hawthorne
Portland, Oregon 97214
(503) 232-1010