



Joey (Bill Hulings) and Vera (Siri Vik) in *Pal Joey*

## Lessons in Lounge Lizardry

Reflections on OFAM's *Pal Joey*

**T**wo-bit affairs, a bored socialite, a nightclub emcee wannabe, a whole gaggle of dissatisfied chorus girls and a straight-laced, strip-teasing reporter – *Pal Joey* is not your average musical. Based on a series of short stories by John O'Hara, it follows the dreams and failures of a charmingly self-centered young opportunist working his way through the Chicago nightclub scene.

"If it is possible to make an entertaining musical comedy out of an odious story, *Pal Joey* is it," said a 1940 *New York Times* review. That was far and away the kindest commentary. *Pal Joey* has been revived off and on since then with moderate success. It has a few truly great songs, a lot of good music and some seriously messed up characters. You probably haven't heard of it because it's a tough show. It's hard to identify with the leads; the plot is dismal yet couched in fun song and dance numbers. Essentially, it's the *As You Like It* of musical theater: too good

to be gathering dust on the stacks, too difficult to stage often.

Thus OFAM offers us an In-Concert experience. Less expensive and with greater focus on the music, it was advertised as having "everything but the set." But with actors reading lines off music stands and a full orchestra on stage, some aspects of the production were very much enriched while others suffered.

The music was a first-rate treat. So often when musicals are staged purely for their entertainment value we forget that there is great music slipping out from somewhere behind a curtain. Not so with an In-Concert production. Having the orchestra assembled on the stage with Robert Ashens conducting brought the focus back to the music and allowed us to really appreciate what we were hearing. Part of the mission of OFAM is to perform great American classics in their original context. "Bewitched" is the big song here, but there are so many other wonderful numbers that I may have overlooked as merely steps towards

resolving a plot had the musical been performed in a traditional manner.

The effect of the In-Concert production on the acting was fascinating. While I think many of the simpler characters of the early American musical would hold up well in a concert setting, *Pal Joey* happens to house two extremely complex human souls. Bill Hulings, although wonderfully charming, just wasn't sleazy enough. Similarly consummate show-woman Siri Vik made a delightfully edgy society maven, but did not have the time to soften Vera's sharp edge and give the character a delicacy that had not yet been decayed by money and beauty.

On the other hand, the actors playing the comedic leads were able to really let loose in this easy setting. Erica Jean as the dour, bespectacled newswoman who lets it *all* hang out, Melba Snyder, was fabulous. Laura Sue Hiszczynskij was tearing about having a great time as the havoc-wreaking chorus girl Gladys Bumbs. These two almost made it impossible for Chas King to steal the show, but he rallied in a red hat and striped suit as the slick and very quick talking Ludlow Lowell, an "artist's representative."

This In-Concert production boasted fabulous choreography and occasional set pieces for musical numbers. While I wouldn't pass up Richard H. Jessup's choreography for anything, it was a little disconcerting to watch actors step around their scripts and break out into a dance at the front of the stage. Yet, the chatter and discontent of the chorus girls and the authenticity of their movement completely enriched the rehearsal hall feel of the production.

"It's interesting, once you get over the music stands," I overheard an audience member comment. As a community, we need to get over them. In-Concert productions are a great way to bring little-known works to Eugene audiences, if we can get our expectations straight.

Ultimately, theater can best be judged by a production's ability to make us feel acutely and sweep us up in its world, and on how it leads us to think. As with all OFAM productions, I walked out a little bit smarter, my understanding of American music being carefully enriched summer after summer. I was not so much pulled into the story as I was invited to float in its music for a while, the misguided dreams of a socialite and a scammer sitting in my heart. **EW**

Caesar (Wilma Silva) cannot shake the fearful night visions



JENNY GRAHAM

## Nowhere to Hide

An electrifying *Julius Caesar* in Ashland

**I** gasp, quickly going cold with horror as the first blade slices into the flesh at the back of her neck. Another falls upon her, and another, brilliancy of blood seeping through her white gown. I am riveted, having come to believe that surely this Caesar, so confident, so charismatic, could not be killed.

Wilma Silva plays Julius Caesar. That a woman should captivate us in the role of a might-be dictator feels in no way forced in the modern, sparse setting. She takes our hearts by right, with that peculiarly Roman capability tinged with infallibility flashing in her ready smile.

From the moment you enter the New Theatre, nay, even before that, the line between audience and performer is blurred. We become her Roman crowd willingly, caught up in the bloody politics of a country in flux. I am uncomfortable and uncertain in my role as both a viewer and de facto cast member.

This uncertainty is echoed in the questions of the play; what is the line between a hero and a tyrant, a liberator and a murderer? *Julius Caesar* is uniquely brilliant in the way the Shakespeare uses language and rhetoric to sway us from one opinion to the next. Gregory Linington (Cassius)

and Danforth Comins (Mark Anthony) let the words roll and thunder in a clash of ideology (or self interest). Jonathan Haugen is compelling as Brutus.

The events in *Julius Caesar* are public, a fact we are never allowed to forget. With few exceptions, each actor rarely leaves the stage and plays several characters. They are constantly watching, ready to jump back into the fray. Gina Daniels works her roles with ease, giving a particularly striking performance in her turn as Portia.

Clean of pageantry and flashy tricks of staging, this show is not the wildly crowd-pleasing kind of play associated with the larger, more well-known (and currently closed due to damage to a support beam) Bowmer Theatre. More than once I cover my lips, trying not to physically cry out for fear it will wake the patron sleeping in the seat next to me. But if the snoozing gentleman was not impressed, the middle school girls across from me were nearly vaulting from their seats in enthusiasm. *Julius Caesar* is an intense, intellectual experience for the passionate lover of Shakespeare. – Anna Grace

*Julius Caesar* runs through Nov. 6 in the New Theatre at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland.