

# 'LET ME ENTERTAIN YOU'

Shirley Andress plumbs new depths in a classic role in *Gypsy*

While not as well known as Jay Gatsby or Huckleberry Finn, Mama Rose is one of the defining characters of American literature. At once a hustler, a social climber, a visionary and an imposter, the hard-edged protagonist of the classic 1959 Broadway musical *Gypsy* would sell not only her soul, but her children's souls as well, to break the bonds of dull poverty and rise to wealth and stardom, vicarious or otherwise.

With a book by Arthur Laurents, music by Jule Styne and lyrics by a young Stephen Sondheim, the show is loosely based on the autobiography of famous striptease artist Gypsy Rose Lee.

In the musical's version of the tale, Mama Rose's two children, the outgoing June and the more-diffident Louise (the future Gypsy), bring home the bread and butter by performing a sweet sister act on the 1920s vaudeville circuit until June, sick of performing and her mother's constraints, runs off with a boyfriend.

That leaves Rose to turn the shy Louise, finally, into a star — as a stripper in a burlesque show.

In too many stagings, Mama Rose is portrayed as nothing but an evil stage mom, a Snidely Whiplash of the wings.

In the production that opened Friday, June 16, at The Shedd, Shirley Andress finds not just considerable depth but near redemption in the role of Rose. Andress, more familiar to local audiences in a pop/jazz idiom, reaches out to channel a bit of Ethel Merman, who starred as Rose in



SHIRLEY ANDRESS, KENADY CONFORTH AND CLARAE SMITH IN *GYPSY*

the original Broadway production.

Stage mom, indeed, but Andress finds warmth and real heart in the backstage darkness, turning herself into a loving tiger mom and pushing her children on stage as a matter of survival.

Directed by Peg Major with music direction by Robert Ashens and choreography by Caitlin Christopher, this *Gypsy* moves right along, mixing up the familiar hits ("Let Me Entertain You," "Small World") with the less familiar ("If Momma Was Married" and "Toreadorables").

Ward Fairbairn does a polished job as Herbie, the girls' manager and Rose's suitor.

Kenady Conforth is perfectly charming as June.

Clarae Smith, who's paid her dues with a series of smaller parts in Shedd shows, is dazzling as Louise/Gypsy, able to navigate the squirmy idea of taking her clothes off for audiences as both a necessity and, finally, as an art form that she can and does control.

The play features younger actors doing the sister act of the early years: Campbell Conforth as Baby June and Noa Ablow Measelle as Baby Louise. And it's the contrast of those two interpretations, innocent and sexy, of "Let Me Entertain You," that gives this show so much irony and pizzazz. — *Bob Keefer*

*Gypsy* continues at The Shedd's Jaqua Concert Hall 7:30 pm June 23-24 and 3 pm June 25. Tickets at [TheShedd.org](http://TheShedd.org).

## THE CHAOS OF A WEDDING DAY GONE WRONG

Very Little Theatre's Perfect Wedding

The title of Very Little Theatre's latest mainstage show, *Perfect Wedding*, is a bit of an oxymoron: There's no such thing.

Karen Scheeland's production of British playwright Robin Hawdon's comedy captures all the neuroses of the special day — and then some. When groom-to-be Bill (Peter Fehrs) wakes up in bed with a woman he doesn't know the morning of his wedding, he tries to cover it all up. The cover up becomes an elaborate mix up involving the best man, Tom (Mark Anderson); a hotel housekeeper, Julie (Samantha Cross); and the best man's new girlfriend, Judy (Alison Meeler).

The cast of six keeps the play moving in a quick rhythm. The dialogue is just fast enough to keep the action moving without sacrificing the biggest comedic moments, such as when the bride's mother Daphne (Tere Tronson) enters a room amid the chaos of conversation and exclaims, "It's going to be a perfect wedding!" As Rachel the bride-to-be, played by the wonderfully articulate first-time thespian Diana Sobczynski, dons her dress for her big day, secrets reveal themselves and plans change.

It's easy to get lost in the wedding-day action, especially with the similarity between character names like Judy and Julie. And there's the wordplay that comes with British humor that might throw audiences off, but what's nice is that the characters are right there

with the audience in this confusion. That's the thing about *Perfect Wedding*. It's confusing because it's meant to be confusing — not because it's executed poorly.

University of Oregon student Samantha Cross steals the show as hotel housekeeper Julie. Her feistiness and timing mix well with her character's astute observations about the dynamics between Bill, Rachel and their friends. Her exclamation "You all are like rabbits. Wait, no, that's an insult to rabbits!" garnered some of the loudest laughs in the show.

Michael Walker's set design and Vern Haffner's set dressing complemented the English setting of the show. With two parallel rooms connected only by one door, the structure allowed for some of the funniest physical gags in the show. It's hard not to laugh when Tom runs around with a butter knife and bursts through the door with a manic look on his face.

*Perfect Wedding* isn't just a light British comedy, though. As Julie points out earlier in the show, the characters all sleep with each other and then try to cover it up. When she says, "Are you sure you want to marry him?" to Rachel, the words hit with a sting. The wedding may not be perfect, but the show is close to getting there. — *Sararosa Davies*

*Perfect Wedding* runs 7:30 pm Thursday, June 22, to Saturday, June 24. Tickets for the last weekend of performances can be purchased at VLT's box office before the show or at [TheVLT.com](http://TheVLT.com).

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