

# THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

## ***A Musical For Anyone Who Loves Musicals - And who doesn't?***

*Philip Dorian – Two River Times, New Jersey, July 20, 2006*

The whole title is *The Musical of Musicals: The Musical* and it has 30 roles. Here, we'll whittle down that title and confine our remarks to six performers. Also, Holmdel Theatre Company's Duncan Smith Theater only has 100 seats, so anyone who enjoys musical theater should grab one quick. For true aficionados, *The Musical of Musicals* is a must-see.

The story, if you can call it that, is age-old. A destitute ingénue fends off the advances of her lecherous landlord and is rescued by a heroic leading man. The melodrama is played out in five different musical styles, and while it's a frivolous concept, it makes the point about how very different from one another composers' styles can be. The first scene sends up Rodgers and Hammerstein ("Oh, what beautiful corn"), followed by Stephen Sondheim ("Hemlock is easy, but too Socratesey") and Jerry Herman, whose stand-in for hostess Mame, referring to a skimpy hors d'oeuvre tray, has the delicious lyric: "Did I put out enough?"

After an intermission (to digest the foregoing delights), the scenario is repeated a la Andrew Lloyd Webber ("I'm so tired of having to sing everything") and Kander and Ebb ("Hola, aloha, hello"). Each of the five scenes is devilishly clever, inventive and amusing; the whole thing is as entertaining as any two hours in recent theater-going memory. Thanks to a creative team as near perfect as ever was assembled locally, this *Musical of Musicals* is every bit as good as was the original off-Broadway production.

Susan Duffy is the five damsels-in-distress, capturing the pouty Laurie of *Oklahoma* as well as the unmistakable take-off of Liza in *Cabaret*. John Durrazzo plays all the heroes. His opening number, evoking Curley's "Beautiful Mornin'," is deceptively well sung. It's almost legit, but not quite, and properly so. Durrazzo and Duffy both act the shifting styles as well as they sing them. (In one of scores of quips, he says "Okay, okay, okay" and she counters with "Don't throw okays at me." Obvious stuff? Sure, but they pull it off delightfully.)

Mary Lawrence and Adam Hayek play the character roles, and they run with them. Hayek is every villain, from the Judd Fry character who lives in a 'lonely room' (those who would cut that essential song from *Oklahoma* take notice) to the venal nightclub Emcee. Along the way he drops a dollop of Carol Channing and more than a hint of Joel Grey into the proceedings and even augments the band, mimicking a muted trumpet. Hayek works hard and makes it look easy, the mark of a gifted comic talent.

At any point in the Jerry Herman portion, Ms. Lawrence could drop the parody and play *Mame* or *Dolly*. In her hands (and voice and body) the lampoons are devastating. (I've seen both *Mame* and *Dolly* recently and, my goodness, these parodies are spot-on.) And with one conspicuous hair roller in place, she's also more Stritch than Elaine herself.

Then there's the singing and dancing chorus, comprised of Amy Lewis and Liz Scanlon - only two, yet they do the work of twenty. (That's my own trivia contribution. Hint: Sondheim.) Costumed in basic black, the better to accessorize, Lewis and Scanlon give great backup and even do a creditable Fosse. Which brings us to choreographer/assistant director Nicole Johnson, who has the knack of pushing amateur dancers to the edge of their abilities, a skill in itself.

Musical director Warren Helms's contribution cannot be over praised. Each of the five scenes is exactly right in style and tempo and every syllable of every song is clear, which, considering the blistering pace of some of it, is well worth noting. Ideally positioned off to the side, Helms on keyboard and virtuoso percussionist Jay Mack are a veritable orchestra.

Credit producer Kelly Bird with selecting the ideal show for the Duncan Smith Theater and for assembling the wonderful cast. She also directed the show with an ear for every fond reference and an eye for such as having Ms. Lawrence carry a pineapple during a *Cabaret* spin. And 'fond' the references are; every caricature stops short of out-and-out mockery. Professional-level attention to detail extends also to Matt Truex's spare, black-curtained setting; Rob Ulrich's creative lighting; and Rachel Hayek's flawless props. (There's a cat mask under the Phantom mask. Who knew?)

Giving the writers last mention shouldn't be construed as a slight. Eric Rockwell and Joanne Bogart wrote the music and lyrics respectively and collaborated on the book. Their bio in the off-Broadway *Playbill* notes that they appeared "in countless shows you've never heard of, with people you're lucky you don't know, in places you wouldn't set foot in." Eric and Joanne, your luck has changed. This *Musical of Musicals* is in a spiffy little theater space and it's being performed by people you'd be proud to know.

One caveat: If you have never seen at least one of *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, *Company*, *A Little Night Music*, *Mame*, *La Cage*, *Phantom*, *Superstar*, *Cabaret* or *Chicago*, you shouldn't bother seeing this *Musical*. But if you've read this far, you're probably not that guy.