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REVIEW: "Ruthless"

Summer Circle Theatre

Nothing held back in this fun parody

By Bridgette M. Redman

Posted: June 26, 2017 at 11:39 p.m.

What does it take to succeed in show business? Talent, hard work, connections? Or just some good old-fashioned ruthlessness?

The title of this musical parody should give away the answer to that question as far as the show by Joel Paley with music by Marvin Laird is concerned.

Directed by Deric McNish at Michigan State University's Summer Circle, "Ruthless" is a hilarious send-up of shows from the silver screen to the Great White Way to reality television. It mixes "The Bad Seed" with "Gypsy" and makes references to everything else in between and afterward.

The play opens with a housewife getting constantly good reports about her sweet and wonderful daughter. Tina, a 3rd grader, is preparing for a Broadway career by learning to sing, act and dance and already shows great promise for her age. When she doesn't get the role she wants, we start to see a darker side of Tina and the adults who surround her.

What makes the show a true delight is Lauren Kreuer, a 6th grader who very believably plays the spoiled yet immensely talented third grader. It's hard to believe things weren't fixed, when Tina doesn't get cast as the lead role in her school play, because Kreuer as Tina is so skilled at acting, dancing and singing. Kreuer is a powerhouse and charmed the audience immediately, even when she did reveal Tina's homicidal tendencies. She understood the parody of what she was doing and shined at it. It's impressive to see that much talent at so young an age. Kreuer is undoubtedly the star of this show.

Surrounding her were other actors just as devoted to their parts and who were generous actors, even while singing about stealing focus from each other. Sarah Goeke is Judy, Tina's mom, and she plays a '50s housewife who is a devoted mother. She could be a Stepford wife, she's so perfect in her household duties. Yet even in the first act, she reveals there might be more talent in her than what she thinks possible. However, she seeks what is best for her daughter and lives only through her. She does draw the line at murder, and faces her first real challenge as a mother.

Sylvia shows up on the scene wanting to be Tina's agent and make her into a star. Sylvia is played by Ryan Bennett, and he is hilarious as the large, deep-voiced Sylvia who once had a career that was ruined by an overly harsh theater critic. Bennett does well at making Sylvia even more ridiculous than she might be otherwise. He's the perfect contrast to Goeke, and helps reveal her talent early on.

The music, directed by Dave Wendelberger, mixes a few comic ballads with mostly upbeat songs that are designed to make the audience laugh or groan. They are parodies and send-ups of show business and the crazy things people do for fame, especially when children are involved.

Brianna Buckley even sings a song about how she hates musicals and why it is such a terrible genre – she plays the theater critic and Judy's adopted mother. She is a heartless critic who takes pride in how many shows she's closed.

Katherine Schooler and Caitlin Dunlap round out the cast playing multiple roles as the frustrated third grade teacher, a reporter, the third grader who gets cast in the lead and Judy's eventual assistant.

The musical takes several fun twists and turns, and makes even the homicidal scenes funny.

Elsbeth Williams did a great scene design with a beautifully painted background that transitioned easily between house and flat. The wide stage left room for dancing and a place for the two-person pit band to sit on the back of the stage, doubling as a bar.

Stephanie Eubank's costumes were also fun, especially when people had to change between acts and scenes into different costumes. Hernando Claros provided props that included murder weapons, cold turkey, and plenty of evidence as to who each character really was.

"Ruthless" is a fun, entertaining musical that was delightfully performed by its cast of six. It's well worth seeing in this outdoor venue.

SHOW DETAILS: Summer Circle Theatre's "Ruthless" continues at Michigan State University Auditorium Building, on the lawn by the Red Cedar River, Grand River and Auditorium Road, East Lansing. Show times: 8 p.m. through June 28. Running time: 2 hours, 17 minutes. Admission: Free. For information: 517-355-6690 or www.theatre.msu.edu/index.php/productions/summer-circle-theatre.

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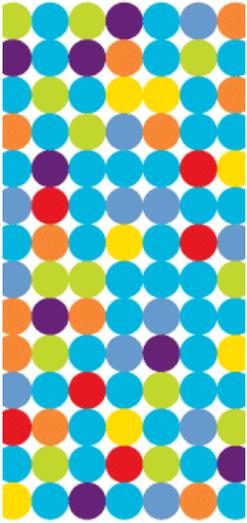
Performance Information

Show times

Wednesday, June 25, 2014 at 8:00 pm
Thursday, June 26, 2014 at 8:00 pm
Friday, June 27, 2014 at 8:00 pm

Saturday, June 28, 2014 at 8:00 pm

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