

Thursday, June 26, 2014

## Rising like a peacock

**REVIEW: MSU Summer Circle Theatre's 'Ruthless'**

 by *Mary C. Cusack*


MSU Summer Circle Theatre's production of "Ruthless" lampoons pop culture obsessions with performing kids and reality TV. Courtesy photo. Judy rises like a phoenix. Well, more like a peacock.

THURSDAY, June 26 — The Summer Circle Theatre Series at MSU continues with a work that investigates the circular nature of families and fates. The musical "Ruthless" is far from an academic view of the topic — it more closely resembles the material covered by a "Dr. Phil" episode, which would actually be the appropriate venue for this family to hold a reunion.

"Ruthless" is a cute and fluffy bit of satire, poking fun at show business in general and theater in particular. It capitalizes on a glut of modern entertainment trends, from reality shows starring pageant brats and their pushy stage moms to the increasing popularity of insipid musicals.

The first act focuses on star wannabe Tina (Lauren Kreuer), who would kill to be the lead in the school production of a Pippi Longstocking musical. Her doting mother Judy (Sarah Goeke) supports Tina's ambitions within reason, but her judgment is overly influenced by Tina's new agent, Sylvia St. Croix (Ryan Bennett).

The drama increases as Judy's theater-critic mother (Brianna Buckley) arrives and spills a dark family secret that sends Judy spinning out of control and into the spotlight. The second act devolves further into farce, as Tina plunges into obscurity and

The story culminates in a finale of Shakespearean proportions —not as serious or skilled as the Bard, certainly, but about as fanciful. The plot twists are ridiculously obvious, which allows the audience to enjoy the performances without being distracted by trying to figure out what might happen next. Who cares about mystery when the characters are this entertaining?

"Ruthless" is the puppy of all satires, gnawing on the industry with its harmless baby teeth. No topic is safe from a good gumming, including theater snobbery over television, theater critics, loose chorus girls and cruise ship entertainment. Still it is good fun, with a family-friendly script that still offers some winking double entendres to keep the adults smirking.

The cast members are committed to their roles, which requires a great deal of physicality. Goeke is a standout as Judy, transitioning seamlessly from a poised and dedicated mother to a narcissistic drama queen. She moves with style and belts out the tunes with confidence. Hers is one of the best performances in a local musical this year.

The set, props and costumes are anachronistically fun and stylish. Pee-wee Herman would feel right at home on this set surrounded by these characters.

While this is a fun piece of theater, the script could use some cutting. Clocking in at over 2 hours and 15 minutes, a half hour could easily be cut. In the hands of a lesser skilled cast, this musical could be torture. With this cast, it's just murder.

Yes, that was a spoiler.

"Ruthless"

MSU Department of Theatre's Summer Circle Theatre series

8 p.m. tonight-Saturday, June 28 (Friday-Saturday shows are preceded by all-ages comedy, "The Summer Circle" at 6 p.m., and followed at 10 p.m. by "The Weird," six short anthological horror plays)

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