

Loads of Fun with *The Music Man* at Glimmerglass

Tuesday, July 24



Glimmerglass Festival's artistic and general director, Francesca Zambello, selected Meredith Willson's 1957 hit, *The Music Man*, for this season's American musical theater presentation. It would be hard to find a better choice for this company, which promotes both young singers and its close ties to the local community. Last Friday evening's performance, the second for the season, provided a highly entertaining evening – a stage filled with color, youthful energy, fine ensemble singing, good humor, all in front of a spectacular set.

The Music Man was Willson's first and only Broadway show. He had played in bands and had done notable radio and film work before he was approached by renowned producer Frank Loesser, who suggested he write a musical about his childhood in Iowa. Willson came up with the idea of creating an entire show as one long lyric, with an underlying rhythm running along with the dialog. After many rewrites over time, he succeeded in making something quite original. This story moves along with a considerable patter and combinations of varying rhythms. The couple that falls in love share the same tune, but set differently. The opening “chorus,” often used in musicals to introduce the story, is here all talking, a rhythmic exchange among a group of salesmen traveling on a jiggling train.

For this production director Marcia Milgrom Dodge made the decision to move the time from 1912 to the 1940s following World War II, feeling that many in the audience today will remember the period and feel a certain nostalgia about the clothing styles and dance moves. The change hardly seemed important—yes, the dress, with colorful and imaginative creations by internationally acclaimed costume designer Leon Wiebers, was clearly of the later period. But because the dialog and topical references would not be changed, some things did not make sense. Making the “Wells Fargo Wagon” into a van painted red, white, and blue just seemed strange, as were many topical allusions. The story is really timeless, and the social issues raised—problems of learning to work together and accomplish goals, adolescent behavior (or misbehavior), basic dishonesty, keeping a sense of community, a need for tolerance – speak as strongly today as they did then.

The story concerns a con man named Harold Hill, who is smooth-tongued and exceedingly inventive in finding ways to fleece the unsuspecting and naïve. He wants to organize a boys' band in the small town of River City, Iowa, and plans to get money for instruments and band uniforms from the easily convinced town folk, and then skip town with the cash. It turns out, however, that he manages to create many positive changes in the community and ends up falling in love and wants to create changes in his own life. There is a lot of good humor and genuine fun in his various activities and their consequences, evoking nostalgic thoughts of the good old times – and of what might be good about today.

The sets for this production, created by James Noone, with skillful lighting by Kevin Adams (both bringing their talents from Broadway), were amazing, starting with two rounded sliding panels, showing the storefronts of the town's businesses (complete with opening and closing doors for many comic entrances and disappearances). The panels met in the center but were opened

back for later scenes, revealing a stylized scenic backdrop of the countryside. The Paroo house slid on and off, as did bookshelves for the library, and the important footbridge. This beautiful set worked very effectively.

The cast – after all a whole town is involved here – appeared in various groups and families including a number of small children. About one-half of the Young American Artists were onstage at one time or another – including the Quartet and all the salesmen on the train except for Wynn Harmon, who plays the envious Charlie Cowell. In the lead was baritone Dwayne Croft, who grew up in Cooperstown and started out in the chorus the first Glimmerglass production. He now sings at the Met. He was clearly having a good time and moved well through this role. His singing was assured, strong, and true, though the voice might be too heavy now for the kind of vocal agility required here. His leading lady was Elizabeth Futral, who played Marian the librarian with understanding, though her opening out to the world and to love would have been more convincing if it had been less abrupt. And for this character a lighter and sweeter voice might have been better. The small boy Henry Wager, who played her troubled little brother Winthrop, had all eyes every time he was onstage, and nearly stole the show.

As the Quartet, tenors Eric Bowden and Adam Bielamowicz (salesmen in the first scene), baritone John David Boehr, and bass-baritone Derrell Acon – all with beautiful individual voices – sang and acted very well. They have a basic role in this show, and as the season progresses, they will probably sound increasingly more like an established barbershop quartet. In speaking part of the mayor, Jake Gardiner, whom we usually hear singing, was convincingly fumbling and pompous, while another show-stealer, Josh Walden as Harold's side-kick Marcellus Washburn, made some fabulous acrobatic moves in his dance sequences.

The choreography by director Dodge, was outstanding—many good ensemble groups doing intricate steps including the Shipooopi, while the eight young dancers in pairs were especially effective, especially Megan Ort and Allan K. Washington, who played the mayor's daughter and the rebellious boyfriend. Several scenes with movement were skillfully done, especially in the library.

The orchestra, under the direction of John DeMain, well known as an opera conductor, especially of new American works, sounded terrific and cheerful through all that familiar music. From the lively happy overture to the quiet ending, DeMain kept his various forces together with assurance and skill, though the ongoing rhythm of work seemed to sag at times. This is a musical for all kinds of ensemble singing, with many levels of complexity – just think of “Lida Rose” with the Quartet and Marian, for example. There was some unevenness here and there, but the women in “Pick-a-Little, Talk-a-Little were close to perfect.

This production has many delightful moments: Amaryllis, played by Aria Maholic (both she and Henry Wager are local children who were auditioned for their roles), doing her cross-hand piece on the piano, followed by “Good Night, My Someone”; Harold turning his blue plaid sport coat inside out to make a band jacket; the women including Marian; Winthrop being handed his cornet; the children were transformed by their being together in a band. This special American show helps us understand the importance of hometown and family, of community and people getting along. Its message that kindness, friendliness, and cheerfulness – and above all, understanding and human feeling – count most of all.

Come and bring your family to see this show. Performances continue through August 24, but tickets are getting scarce. For information visit www.glimmerglass.org.