

Americana Perfected

by B.A. Nilsson on July 25, 2012

The Music Man

Music and libretto by Meredith Willson, directed by Marcia Milgrom Dodge Glimmerglass Festival, through Aug. 24



Elizabeth Futral as Marian the librarian in The Music Man

The two most famous examples of the stubborn face of Iowa are Grant Wood's *American Gothic* and the song "Iowa Stubborn" from early in *The Music Man*. Appropriate, then, that they're brought together—however anachronistically—in the Glimmerglass Festival's production of Meredith Willson's much-loved musical, in a deft choreographic/staging touch by choreographer-director Marcia Milgrom Dodge.

Anachronistic because the painting dates from 1930, while the show is set in 1912. But the Glimmerglass production's setting was moved to 1946, a noble but useless conceit because everything about the show—lyrics, characterizations, premise, mores, customs and above all, pre-atomic innocence—screams 1912. In its way, it was like one of those vintage-Hollywood movies set in a more distant past but anchored to its own present by designer gowns and hairstyles.

I want to get this out of the way right now because this was the finest production of the piece I've ever seen—and the sense of anachronism had an unexpected payoff in helping make the color-blind casting unremarkable, as it should be.

Two triumphs lead a list of many more: the return of Cooperstown native Dwayne Croft to sing the title role, and the lack of amplification.

Let me wax lyrically upon the latter. When you stick microphones on singers, a tremendous amount of vocal beauty is lost. The amplification crowds the vocal and instrumental spectrums into a narrow, metallic point that hangs in front of the proscenium, less and less related, the farther back you sit, to the onstage action. With the greater availability of wireless rigs, it even has infected community theaters, as a recent, ear-numbing experience of mine proved. Mark Grant's book *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* goes into much more, very convincing detail. What an absolute joy, then, to hear this musical in its native glory.

Croft comes to Glimmerglass fresh from the Met's *Das Rheingold* (as, too, does Eric Owens, appearing in Glimmerglass's *Aida* and *Lost in the Stars*)—and that's one of some 30 roles Croft has sung at that theater. The fact that he personifies fast-talking charmer Harold Hill with such aplomb only proves that good musical theater resists further categorization.

His opening number, "Trouble," almost performs itself. But when, as a performer, you fully inhabit it, when you believe every word (and we're talking some strange words here), it's a piece of theatrical magic.

The Music Man is front-loaded with astonishing numbers, and by the time we meet spinster Marian Paroo (Elizabeth Futral), she has plenty to top—but the progression of "Piano Lesson" into "Goodnight, My Someone" proved that this Marian would be a worthy adversary for Hill. Futral acted with transparent conviction, and sang with a voice of compelling passion. By the time she and Croft joined voices for the eleven o'clocker "Till There Was You," we were as transported as we would be by any (dare I say it) big-time opera duet.

Eight of the Festival's Young Artists, including Allan K. Washington as Tommy and Megan Ort as Zaneeta, were the dancing corps, realizing Dodge's throwback choreography with seeming effortlessness. Bob Fosse lurked behind the stylized steps of "Marian the Librarian," and there was more than a touch of Michael Kidd in "Shipooopi"—which only confirms that the dance was rooted in excellent tradition.

"Shipooopi" also put Josh Walden's feet in the air, as his lithe Marcellus Washburn not only extended his well-realized character in movement but also touched his heels in bells incredibly high above the stage. (He's also credited as assistant choreographer.)

Willson, who also was a radio bandleader and symphonic composer, explored new expressions of words in song, and the opening a cappella number, "Rock Island," skillfully presents a trainload of exposition even as it suggests that this isn't your average (1950s) musical. The words, the rhythms, the characterizations and the comedy blended in a feat of magnificent staging.

Despite all of the show's trombone-filled bluster, one of the most affecting moments occurs in the second act, when Marian sings "Will I Ever Tell You?" Sitting nearby is her worried mother, played by Cindy Gold with such easy simplicity that she colors the scene with added wistfulness without ever drawing focus from her daughter's plaint.

On the other hand, young Henry Wager, as the bashful Winthrop, steals all of his scenes, and well he should. Again, he brings a comparatively understated presence, thank goodness, which is therefore all the more accomplished. And wait till he breaks out in song!

The barbershop quartet is great. The "Pickalittle" ladies are wonderful, particularly Ernestine Jackson as Eulalie Shinn. Jake Gardner's Mayor Shinn is a study in how to play believable bluster. And anchoring it all is the always-excellent orchestra, conducted by John DeMain.

We're farther away in time from the show's original production as that production was from the simpler time in which it was set, yet the core issues remain current, especially the power of finding meaning for oneself by pursuing a dream. As you watch that duet break out on the footbridge, I'm betting you'll think of a dream to chase.