

“The Music Man” @ Glimmerglass 8/20/12

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By Joseph Dalton

COOPERSTOWN – Opera companies have been dipping into the pool of musical theater for decades now. The repertory expansion is an essential part of last year’s transformation of Glimmerglass Opera into the Glimmerglass Festival, and if it helps the outfit survive then save your complaints, please.

What makes “The Music Man,” this year’s offering, such a pleasure is that the piece itself is such a pleasure. This is in sharp contrast to the two previous musicals seen at Glimmerglass, “Annie Get Your Gun” last year and “Kiss Me Kate” in 2008, each overly fraught with the angry battle of the sexes (so operatic!).

“The Music Man” is about little more than community and music, which is really the shortest summary imaginable for the renewed mission of Glimmerglass. In this same sense, the best thing about the production is the strength of the ensemble as a whole.

The townspeople may live in River City, Iowa, but the small town feeling is so familiar, the warm sentiments in the singing and dancing so genuine, that one kept expecting some reference to a certain lakeside town in upstate New York. But maybe such deliberate insertions are best saved for the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas.

Director and choreographer Marcia Milgrom Dodge sticks to the text of the original, though it sometimes contradicts aspects of the staging. And that leads to a warning for picky purists: This is an updated production. Yes, the directorial urge to modernize has even infiltrated musicals. The original “Music Man” takes place in 1912, and this version makes the quantum, radical leap into the 1940s. Oh, the gall.

Nostalgia still rules and is underscored by the costumes, which seem taken from a Norman Rockwell catalogue, as well as the colorful set. The backdrop is, in fact, modeled on a Grant Wood painting of rolling Iowa hills.

Baritone Dwayne Croft, a Cooperstown native, plays Harold Hill with serviceable energy and pleasant singing, but not much spark. He tends to talk out of the side of his mouth, and it’s not clear if that’s an affectation of the underhanded character or some unexpected result of Croft’s no longer being on the operatic stage.

Soprano Elizabeth Futral, as Marion the librarian, is also a refugee of opera. The power – and beauty — of her voice is obvious in every song, yet she never seems shoehorned into the role. Like every other citizen of this River City, from the verbose mayor to the lisping sprout, she’s easy to like.

Joseph Dalton is a freelance writer in Troy and can be reached at Dalton@HudsonSounds.org.