

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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Showtimers' "She Loves Me" transcends community theater

By Christina Koomen

First, the bad news: If you didn't find time to go to Showtimers' recent production of "She Loves Me," you're out of luck. The show closed Feb. 20.

The good news accrues to all those who did grab tickets to see the first play of the company's 2022 season, which received a well-deserved standing ovation after the final performance — reportedly one of several during the run.

Visit showtimers.org to see what productions the group has planned for May, July, October and December. If they are on this level, they are worth catching.

Director Stevie Holcomb, who has been active with Showtimers since 1991, assembled a stellar cast and crew, whose skills were on glorious display every moment from the opening curtain to the final bow.

Strictly speaking, Showtimers is community theater. "She Loves Me" blew that characterization right out of the water. Staying true to the period vibe of the original, the show had an effervescent energy reminiscent of classics like "Hello Dolly." Yes, it was that good.

The musical is based on the 1937 play "Parfumerie," written by a Hungarian playwright named Miklós László, and originally produced on Broadway by the legendary Harold Prince. Hollywood has grabbed onto its romantic storyline multiple times, from 1940's "The Shop Around the Corner" to the internet-age adaptation "You've Got Mail." The saying "everything old is new again" applies: the central characters are a man and a woman getting to know one another via correspondence before actually meeting.

Elliot Raff plays the earnest Georg Nowack, one of the clerks at Maracek's, a high-end ladies' shop full of perfumes, cold creams and other staples of feminine beauty. His co-workers include Bradley Kraft as Ladislav Sipos, a modest company man who just wants to hang onto his job; the caddish Steven Kodaly, played in a series of garish suits by Aaron Sifford; the lovely Ilona Ritter, portrayed by Jane Ostdeik, who is unhappily involved with Kodaly; and Patrick Joseph as the enthusiastic young delivery boy Arpad Laszlo.

Together they mind the stock, wait on the regulars and bid a musical adieu to each customer as they leave. (You won't get treatment like that at a big box store!)

Into this mix comes the spunky Amalia Balash (Brynn Scozzari), desperate to see the imposing owner, Mr. Maracek (Daniel Lewis), so she can ask for a job. It doesn't look good at first, but she jumps in to sell a customer a tepidly received new store product, and closing the sale in front of the boss gets her hired.

Georg and Amalia have no idea that they are now working with each other's "Dear Friend."

There's tension between Georg and Mr. Maraczek, which gets sorted out by the end of the play, but not before it threatens to throw a monkey wrench into Georg's first meeting with his mystery woman. The scene in the café, where Amalia waits with her rose bookmark, gives the ensemble, along with the priceless headwaiter (Lyle Blake Smythers), a chance to shine.

Professionally, there's also friction between Georg and Amalia, and it too threatens to derail their would-be romance before it even gets off the ground. But Georg has an opportunity to repair the damage, which sets the happy ending in motion.

It would be impossible to single out any one or two actors for the quality of their performance, because everyone brought magic to their roles, including vocals that had many in the audience remarking about the operatic magnificence of the voices. Among the more than two-dozen musical numbers, the principles all had outstanding solos; there were also several selections that required precise timing by multiple players, and there was not a missed note to be found. It all came to a crescendo with "Twelve Days to Christmas" — a long, complex and wonderfully choreographed piece that was laugh-out-loud funny.

And that was another of the show's charms: the comedy rolled naturally throughout, driven by characters, situations and deftly crafted song lyrics — not forced by pratfalls or lame one-liners or other cheap maneuvers.

Well-deserved kudos go to the rest of the cast for interacting so seamlessly with the leads: Chandra Shepard, Victoria Ferris, Julie Wheeler, Ashley Light and Carolyn Watson portraying customers; and ensemble members Anna Kimerer, Joseph Craft, Justin Linville, Mark Smith, Quacie Spence and Connor Wheeler.

Equally worthy was the production team, which pulled off high quality set designs and changes, split-second sound cues, and ingenious prop elements. (Holcomb reveals that when Georg brings ice cream to a sick Amalia, it's really mashed potatoes!)

The crew included music director Micah Pick, choreographer Traci Addison, stage manager Jenny Saunders and producer Gary Reid.

The backstory suggests that this production was one of those harmonic convergences that only happens once in a while. It was originally supposed to be the Christmas show a couple of years ago; then COVID came along. Holcomb also reports that she didn't actually choose "She Loves Me" herself; the board approached her about directing the show, perhaps mindful of the 2016 Broadway revival (for Showtimers too, which staged it in 2008), but also Holcomb's own attachment to the play.

"It's well known there how much I love the show," Holcomb wrote in a Facebook message. "It's simply the perfect musical."

In this case, it certainly was.

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'Fun Home' a journey to understanding

By Christina Koomen

Tennessee Williams reportedly wrote in his production notes for “The Glass Menagerie” that because it was a “memory play,” it could be “presented with unusual freedom of convention.”

A Mill Mountain Theatre cast and crew has applied such freedom of convention to outstanding effect in Alison Bechdel's "Fun Home." The second show in the theater's 2022 Fringe series has one weekend remaining on the Waldron Stage.

Bechdel based this distinctive and engaging musical on memories of her youth and her relationship with her father, a complicated man whom she has devoted heart and soul to understanding.

The show's tone is often good humored and upbeat — except for when it can't be, when the cracks in the happy family facade multiply and grow like fault lines in the earth. Some pretty big plot points emerge early on, and the story is less about building toward an unexpected conclusion than about the messy business of processing one's past.

We meet three Alisons during this taut, 90-minute show: a little girl, a college co-ed and a working adult. The latter is literally sketching her memories into a graphic novel — the real-life memoir “Fun Home” that made the New York Times bestseller list in 2006.

Hayley Palmer plays grown-up Alison with thoughtful subtlety. She weaves her presence throughout the action, as narrator, observer or player in various sequences of her life, with a wonderful deadpan delivery for some of the show's funnier lines.

Dad is played by Michael Hunsaker, in a powerful performance that ranges from blustering at his family to walking on eggshells, manifesting an inner turmoil from which he cannot escape. The real Bruce Bechdel cobbled together a curious bouillabaisse of professions: English teacher, house remodeler and funeral home operator. “Fun Home,” it turns out, is the family's nickname for the mortuary business, not to mention a tragi-comic play on words.

Carlyn Connolly brings a heartbreaking dignity to Helen, Alison's long-suffering mother, who protects her children as best she can from the riptides below the surface of their outwardly happy home.

Riley Whisnant, a rising seventh grader at Roanoke Catholic School and an MMT regular, plays young Alison and continues to show some serious acting chops. Stephanie Berger portrays college-age Alison with all the poignant vulnerability of a young woman grappling with a profound life passage. That passage involves her newfound college partner Joan, whom Alexandra Rivers plays with sympathetic aplomb.

Rounding out this top-notch cast are Josh Romeo and Lillian Salazar as Alison's brothers, and Isaac Bouldin as Roy. All are terrific in smaller roles that nevertheless add important notes to Alison's life.

This could not have been an easy story to set to music, but between several stand-alone numbers and a fair amount of recitative, it works smashingly well, with kudos to music director Dan Pardo and the cast's brilliant voices.

“Fun Home” opened last weekend, arriving on the Mill Mountain stage in June to coincide with Pride Month. As director Katharine Quinn writes in her program notes, “Three-dimensional queer characters remain underrepresented in musical theater.” Given its themes of sexual discovery and revelation, the show is best suited for mature audiences.

The production team hopes Bechdel's story will encourage conversation in the wider community. But even for those with no touchstone in the LGBTQ+ world, "Fun Home" is at its heart a human story that speaks to us all.

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'Christmas Belles' has antics aplenty

By Christina Koomen

"Christmas Belles," playing for one more weekend at Attic Productions, is billed as a "Southern-fried yuletide comedy" and boy howdy, that's a fact! It may be Christmas, but there's no Norman Rockwell nostalgia about this holiday story — just wacky characters and wacky situations, guaranteed to put a smile on your face.

The action revolves around the production of a Christmas show at the Tabernacle of the Lamb Church in Fayro, Texas, where Honey Rae Futrelle (Dixie Hartvigsen) has taken over direction of the show in a desperate attempt to rebuild her checkered reputation. Needless to say, things do not go smoothly.

Most of the action takes place in the church community room, where a festively lit saguaro cactus dominates the holiday decorations. A few stealthy set changes in the wings provide additional context. We see the florist shop, whose proprietor, Miss Geneva Musgrave (Katerina Yancey), is none too pleased about being usurped from the directorship she's held for 27 years. We also visit the jail, where Honey Rae's sister Twink (Kerry Williams) is doing time for accidentally burning down part of the town in a fit of revenge against her ex-boyfriend. Deputy Sheriff John Curtis Buntner (David Boyer) is charged with keeping an eye on Twink, which turns out to be no easy task.

And then there's sister Frankie (Kelli Hobson), so pregnant with twins she could pop any day, but nevertheless providing the calm in this family storm. Her husband, Dub Dubberly (Paul Mullins), is trying to earn extra money playing a department store Santa, but even that manages to go awry. Meanwhile, their daughter, Gina Jo (Kailee Weiman), is for some reason trying to avoid Pastor Justin Waverly (Jesse Womack), the man she's been dating — much to his consternation.

Rounding out these colorful townsfolk are newcomer Rhonda Lynn Lampley (Katie Miner), who's harboring a secret as she tries to fit into the community; the outrageous town socialite Patsy Price (Lela Brown); and Raynerd Chisum (Steven Aaron), a good-hearted soul who "just loves Christmas."

The cast does a wonderful job of bringing these characters to life, providing comedy, to be sure, but also some genuinely heartfelt moments along the way. Don't be surprised if you find yourself rooting for everything to work out.

In a line that could apply to real life, Rhonda Lynn says at one point: "These days, laughter's just about the only medicine any of us can afford." For anyone having trouble getting into the holiday spirit, Attic Productions just might have the cure for what ails you.