

Substitute productions bring farce to area stages



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"The People's Critic"

For Conroe residents who might have strolled past the historic Crighton Theatre last Saturday evening, there was a good chance of hearing audience laughter rolling out the doors, rather than the elegant tunes of composer, Cole Porter.

The Stage Right production in progress was Ken Ludwig's, "Lend Me A Tenor," directed by Manny Cafeo. The show originally scheduled was "Cole," a tribute to the life and music of Cole Porter, which will hopefully make it to the Crighton stage at a future date. Technical issues surrounding acquisition of that show had caused the substitution of Mr. Ludwig's comedy. For those preferring laughs to the superb music of the extensive Porter songbook, that may have been a good thing.

Having said that, it is worth noting that the laughs were not non-stop. There were stretches where the subtleties of comedy eluded the hard-working cast. Nevertheless, the audience found plenty to laugh at when things were going well. It has often been said that comedy is that most difficult of challenges for actors.

In "Lend Me a Tenor," we have the tale of an opening night at the Cleveland, Ohio opera company headed by

blustering and business-like, Henry Saunders (Wayne Krennerich). A renowned guest tenor (Tito Merelli, portrayed by Harold E. Wood) is expected to perform the lead in "Otello," and the nerdy (and panicky) company lackey, Max (Mike Anderson), is expected to keep the temperamental tenor in good shape until show time. Don't count on it with the zany and mad-cap events that follow. The action plays out on the crisp, clean, 1930's vintage cutaway set of designer, Greg Kelly, which nicely depicts both the parlor and bedroom of the hotel suite that will house the tenor during his visit. Merelli's wife, Maria (Catherine Anderson), is a wonderful tyrant who terrorizes her husband and everyone else while adding to the fun.

Meanwhile Henry's flighty daughter, Maggie (Giny Mendez), seems to juggle affection for Max with infatuation for Tito. There is additional comic relief from the hotel bellhop (Tommy Hunter), and Tito's co-star, Diana (Amy Sowers). And for visual hilarity we have Stage Right favorite, Carolyn Corsano Wong in the role of Opera Guild chairman, Julia Leverette. She was bedecked in a glittering, silver-sequined gown that had her being aptly described as looking "like the top of the Chrysler Building."

Intermission provided some pleasant recorded big band music, and tasty coffee in the lobby. Then the antics of Act Two proved to be the funniest part of the play. Imagine Max being tapped to fill in for Tito in the role of



Courtesy photo

Carolyn Wong, left, and Giny Mendez, right, perform in Stage Right's current production of "Lend Me a Tenor." The show continues at the Crighton Theatre through March 7.

Otello. On the other hand, why not drop by the Crighton and see for yourself.

Another local company, Texas Repertory Theatre, had planned a production of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" that had to be replaced by this month's merry offering of Paul Rudnick's, "I Hate Hamlet," directed by Craig A. Miller. Steven Fenley starred impressively as the ghost of John Barrymore in this oft-amusing farce which tells the tale of young, successful T.V. series actor, Andrew Rally (Rob de los Reyes), who moves from Los Angeles to New York for a chance to play "Hamlet" with Shakespeare in the Park. As luck would have it, a nutty, psychic realtor named Felicia (Marcy Kearns), rents Andrew the medieval, castle-like apartment (scenic designer, Liz Freese) that had been the home of the late Barrymore. With comic flair, Jen Lucy played Andrew's silly and virginal girlfriend, Dierdre.

Fenley's explosive and smoky first appearance as the ghost was quite dramatic, not to mention amusing, as he arrives a bit dazed and declares,

"Am I dead or just terribly drunk?" Also dramatic were Fenley's fine deliveries of several "Hamlet" soliloquy samples while instructing Andrew on how to succeed in the role Barrymore played to such acclaim. Rick Olvera played Gary, Andrew's annoyingly super-hip writer/director pal from Hollywood, and Barbara Lasater rounded out the fine cast as Lillian, Andrew's agent. For details of Texas Repertory's upcoming productions, visit the website at www.TexRepTheatre.org.

Stage Right's "Lend Me a Tenor," continues at Conroe's Crighton Theatre through March 7 with Friday and Saturday evening performances at 8 p.m. and Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. today and on March 7. For further information call (936) 441-7469 or visit the website at www.stage-right.org.

Bentley's columns have appeared in newspapers from the East Coast to the Gulf Coast and may be viewed online at the website: www.ThePeoplesCritic.com E-mail may be directed to ThePeoplesCritic@earthlink.net.