

Guest Theatre Review: Falsettos

By Robin Pittis

Centre Stage With Lyla Miklos on 101.5 FM Facebook Page

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Hello Centre Stage Fans,

First of all a big apology for missing my slot on the show last night. To make it up to you, a few words about Falsettos, and a hint or two about Assassins. I really enjoyed Falsettos, and I'm looking forward to the rest of HTI's season. You're A Good Man Charlie Brown and Evita are old faves, and Falsettos is a new love - given quite an expert musical performance by a cast and pit band with deep reservoirs of talent!

It's a portrait of the post-modern extended family in the late seventies/early eighties. Gay man divorces wife for his lover, she marries his therapist, and their son hates all of them... except the lover. This will be a familiar tale to many an eighties kid, whose parents or friend's parents divorced, who learned to use the latch key, cook their own meals in a microwave, and the emotional navigations of joint custody very young. It's a portrayal of family and queerness, and community.

Right from the opening number "Four Jews In A Room Bitching" you know this will be a funny, funny show - ribald, direct, and on the nose. It's surprisingly moving, by the end, too, and it's no quick cake-walk. This is an epic saga of family relationships from 1979-81, that ranges through the dining rooms, therapy rooms, squash courts, and ball parks of New York city.

Marvin the family man gone queer is played by Stephen Koshurba. Koshurba is a former pit musician who gathered his courage to get on the boards and hasn't looked back. He can handle the very considerable musical demands of the show, and looks the part of the sensitive, intelligent Marvin, though the explosive anger the part requires is less natural to him. (Additionally make-up over a distinctive tattoo would have suited character and period better).

Beth Rogers-Cassey plays Trina, the abandoned wife. She's a little too good looking for a character that is described as plain, but her years and years of training are essential to carrying this show, and several of her songs go for the gut. Emotionally; I couldn't imagine any other local actress in this part.

Sporting a suitably eighties mustache, Dustin Jodway takes on another big HTI part, having done several, and carries the Jewish Headshrinker Mendel with vocal confidence and precision, and assured comic timing.

The stunning thing about this show is the sheer ambition of the score and book! It's very very funny, but also sad, and wise, and desperate, and delightful. It's one new note after another, and no rest for anyone for very long. Actors must have reserves of endurance, and emotional flexibility. This is a musical marathon, and the singers and band are totally up for the challenge here.

Production-wise, I have to say, I was more confident of my safety with the Guns at the players Guild, than the squash rackets at HTI. The raquetball game is a fantastic song, and it definitely needs a high energy attack, but the lack of precision in this case cost the show here. Of course the time and energy to required to be more precise would also be a considerable demand on the production, and nobody has infinite resources. I do recommend that the actors USE THE LANYARDS ON THE RACKETS!!! Centrifugal force is not a friend in this situation. People get injured on stage, and in theatres, quite often. I have seen this. I have injured myself onstage, and been present for people falling off of stages. Theatres are dangerous places, to sing, dance, and act all at once requires great focus, which can make us vulnerable to silly dangers we'd otherwise deal with. I've seen blood flow in first person, and heard many an eye witness account of eyebrows burnt by flashpots, and people with long lasting, indeed permanent injuries. No less professional a company than the Stratford festival once sent a Ceasar to the hospital with knife wounds.

Anyway, faithful Centre Stage fans, I had a very busy Sunday, so I'll send part two along shortly... there are a couple of performances yet to examine, and I haven't given you any juicy tidbits about Assassins yet!

Be warned, musical theatre fans, this what happens to a reviewer let loose with no word limit, or deadline, when he has seen worthy work. What else is important to say? Well, I haven't addressed the contribution of Jake Sim as Jason, or Greg Solomon's Whizzer. (That's the name of the character he portrays, just to be clear).

Jake Sim's professional commitment, thoroughness, and stamina are impressive in a young teenager, and this show would not have been possible without him. Genius might be too strong a word - but talented, disciplined beyond his years with the potential to earn a professional living and a long career well under way? Yep! Go for it, Jake. Invest wisely, learn from people you trust, be prepared to make your own work when you have to, and keep that discipline going. There are opportunities to be had, certainly. Equally, don't forget to let yourself be a kid, and know that your life is your own to live, not anyone else's. Showbiz is not a kind business to even to the most successful, so be sure to know the rest of life's gifts too.

Greg Solomon took time from his studies at Sheridan to do this part, and it is a great one for him. He acquits himself with professionalism, and never misses a note or step in a show with thousands of mistakes to make.

The indomitable Lyla Miklos and mellifluous and elegant Melissa Todd, as Dr.Charlotte and Cordelia as the Lesbians next door, make a beautiful and charming odd couple, dancing a brazen and winsome two step that is lovely to behold.

On the whole this is a pretty spectacular cast for community theatre, and an ambitious, brave and daunting show, which puts some powerfully talented singers and musicians to the test.

Musical Director Charlie Henderson, who clearly gets around in the community leading bands for many local groups, leads the pit band and guides the singers with delightful humour and emotional sensitivity.

I don't know if it was his orchestration, but the addition of playful woodwind parts for multi-instrumentalist Matt Weil were very much felt as a distinctive and uplifting presence in the show's accompaniment. Again, without the talent and expertise of this band - this show would be agony. With them - headed towards ecstatic!

A confident and capable stage manager is a must for this show, too, and Monica Cairney delivers on a show that must have hundreds, if not thousands of cues to keep track of, quite a few quick changes, and only one ASM at her disposal. I don't know if HTI gives tech awards, but it would be hard to beat Cairney this year.

This isn't a huge cast show, but it's not at all a simple straightforward piece, either, and this group is clearly placing big demands on it's resources, this season. It seems endemic to all community groups right now that new blood is essential. Volunteerism seems to be on the wane, and theatre, sadly, at least in Hamilton, waning in cultural market share.

One of the big problems with theatre is that it happens behind closed doors. A great many Hamiltonians will never have been inside the doors of 80 Queen Street, the Dofasco Centre, or 140 MacNab. Maybe we need to have a parade on World Theatre Day? With Hollywood beamed into every home and laptop, we're going to have advocate strongly for our creative arts communities to make them thrive!

The weak areas of this show are production - the set in particular is minimal, and some of the acting choices are definitely awkward. Too much yelling at each other nose to nose, which is really incredibly rare, even with angry folks, in my experience. It could simply be the Koshurba's too sweet a guy to get to Marvin's wild side really right at this point in his acting career. Likewise he and Solomon's relationship as lovers was very timid and stagey. Acting commitment is essential to making the relationships real, so the songs are juiced with emotional impact.

But the singing, the humour, the humanity and pathos of this show is well worth a night out. It's got tough competition for the musical audience right now, though. Smith and Boudreau's *Assassin's* is a must see, and a Hamilton premiere no less. I can't give away too much of my review which one hopes will appear in next week's *View* (alas, no guarantees ever in print journalism, I find). I can say Tim Denis' John Wilkes Booth dominates the second half, and there are some very funny, very talented performances in a cast with no weak links, in an important musical... 'nough said? Think so. Lot's of love to the musical fan brethren. Keep your toes tappin' and your heart singing - and, please, please play SAFE!