

6-30-1977

Old Tricks in 'Funny Thing'

Walter Lazenby

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/lazenby_reviews

Recommended Citation

Lazenby, Walter, "Old Tricks in 'Funny Thing'" (1977). *Walter Lazenby Reviews*. 19.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/lazenby_reviews/19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theatre Arts at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walter Lazenby Reviews by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

Old Tricks in 'Funny Thing'

By WALTER LAZENBY

CHARLESTON — Stephen Sondheim's distinguished music and lyrics team up with all the tricks of ancient Roman comedy in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," playing again Friday and Saturday nights at Eastern.

It is a rather unlikely combination — Sondheim's contribution sophisticated and challenging, the book a simple collection of usual motifs and stock characters found in farces.

The device of mistaken identity comes into full play: on one level certain characters do not know their own identities until matching rings make everything clear, and on another level a manipulating character plots multiple deceptions which culminate in an all-out chase of THREE look-alikes.

And how's this for fun? — an innocent boy falls in love with a courtesan next door (poor zoning in Rome) and later his father makes advances to the same girl without knowing of his son's interest. Their "courtships" offer a nice contrast between young love and middle-aged opportunism.

The shrewish wife, the braggart warrior, and the clever schemer-servant are all there.

The songs, as Sondheim said in a recent interview, create

A Review

little islands of calm amid this hurly-burly, allowing the audience to employ their brains momentarily.

I found the blend very palatable and Eastern's production hilarious, and co-directed by E.G. Gabbard and Alice Stoughton. Its transitions are so smooth that it is hard to tell where blocking ends and choreography begins.

And the summer troupe is unusually large and experienced.

There is seasoned Patrick Richardson, who lithely postures and prances through the role of Pseudolus ("Falsity"), the slave who wants to earn his freedom by maneuvering to help out his young master.

There is John Hightower (Hysterium), veteran of several major roles at Eastern, whose wide-eyed abandon in rendering the song "I'm Calm" is a tour de force.

Bev Benda gives a convincing impersonation of the domineering Roman matron (Domina), and Earl Halbe responds with good timing to her barked commands.

Both Michael Madlem (Hero) and Hillary Nicholson (Philia)

put good voices to good use in their well-pantomimed number "Lovely," and "Free," with Madlem and Richardson, builds effectively.

But it is Randy Haege's accomplished and insightful playing as Miles Gloriosus that gave me the greatest pleasure. Certain purposeful touches in his interpretation prodded me into recognizing the kind of psyche which motivates a warrior to boast of his prowess in killing enemies and ravishing women. Such psychological portraiture is above and beyond the call of duty in farce, but Haege supplies it, to his credit.

Nancy Paule has come up with some wildly weird get-ups for the courtesans and has utterly triumphed in the design and execution of Miles Gloriosus' dazzling suit.

C.P. Blanchette's effective set features simplified cut-out exteriors of three Roman houses, with upper-level acting areas for two of them.

The orchestra, under John Maharg's direction, gives strong back-up but remains appropriately subordinated to the singers' capabilities, so that all the lyrics come across clearly.

Tip for a holiday weekend: Go! See!



Randy Haege as Miles Gloriosus.