

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## A Lilting Model of Jane Austen's Emma

Sylvie · Wednesday, February 12th, 2020

It's hard these days to find a musical written for the sheer lighthearted fun of it, one that may not shake the earth, but can provide some welcome distraction and amusement for its inhabitants. If that sounds appealing to you, Santa Barbara's Ensemble Theatre Company (ETC), has just the ticket: a nifty production of Paul Gordon's 2006 musical adaptation of *Emma*, Jane Austen's last completed and published novel of her lifetime (her final/final one, *Persuasion*, was published posthumously). Nor does it hurt that the show is playing in that city's spacious New Vic.

I say "nifty" because it benefits from some top talent in commanding roles, an elegant late Georgian-Regency set by Stephen Gifford, period costumes to match by Bruce Goodrich, lively piano accompaniment by musical director Brent Schindele and good lighting from Jared A. Sayeg.



Jenna Lea Rosen and Samantha Eggers star in the Ensemble Theatre Company's production of "JANE AUSTEN'S EMMA," book, music and lyrics by Paul Gordon, directed by Andrew Barnicle and now playing at the NEW VIC THEATRE in Santa Barbara.

The musical wafts us back to the days when *politesse* reigned in society (at least in public). It also was a time when a well-to-do young woman's major preoccupation was finding love and getting married, preferably to some handsome young man, with money, land and a title. You get the idea.

In short, *Emma* is a fairy tale, as were Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* and of course *Jane Eyre* (also musicalized by Gordon, winning him a 2001 Tony Award for his music and lyrics).

Emma, the person, is a lissome, self-centered young woman with not enough things to do to fill up the hours in her day. So she chooses to spend an abundance of it devising (and sometimes disrupting) other people's flirtations.

Some of us might call that meddling. Others might call it poking your nose where it doesn't belong. But it was a sure way to kill the boredom that must have plagued Upper Crust life in the early 1800s — and boredom in the theatre is its biggest threat. When Emma's father complains (as he often does) that he doesn't like change, consider that an endemic trait of what ailed them.

So Emma's preoccupation is in every theatrical sense a welcome distraction. It's also subversive. Singing a lilting score with clever lyrics about the intrigues and *amours* of others demands flair

and some mild palpitations to deliver a couple of pleasantly engaging hours.



James Daniel Olivas, Samantha Eggers, Janna Cardia, Jenna Lea Rosen, Kevin Earley and Erika Schindele star in the Ensemble Theatre Company's production of "JANE AUSTEN'S EMMA," book, music and lyrics by Paul Gordon, directed by Andrew Barnicle and now playing at the NEW VIC THEATRE in Santa Barbara.

If Gordon's book and lyrics suffer from anything, it's those pesky good manners that don't contain quite enough drama. Director Andrew Barnicle's ace in the hole (Gordon's as well) is to poke fun at all the formality. Without a grand climax, we get smaller, satirical ones. And nobody handles them better than the smart, full-throated Samantha Eggers as Emma Woodhouse, the beneficent busybody who eventually discovers that while she was busy planning other people's lives, she neglected planning her own. (Never fear. She gets around to it.)

Eggers gets plenty of leavening from Jenna Lea Rosen as the benighted Harriet Smith, Emma's favorite *protégée* and foil, mercilessly arranging and rearranging poor Harriet's slightly misguided romantic enthusiasms. Rosen, a born comedian with the manner, face and voice to go with it, nearly steals the show. If once in a while the mugging goes just a tad too far, the production joyfully welcomes it. Her antics liven up every moment that she spends on stage.

The show's third big asset — and it's a major one — is Kevin Earley's seasoned Mr. Knightley. As practically a member of the Woodhouse household (his brother is married to Emma's sister), he's the voice (and what a voice) of reason and wisdom. He's a man our giddy Emma regards as something of family pet, until her own missteps and a few other untoward developments awaken her to a far more interesting possibility.

As you can tell by now, intrigue, frivolity, trivia and a delightful silliness rule the day. Or the evening. The balance of this consistently effective ETC cast more than holds its own, with a special shout out to Janna Cardia in the tricky role of Miss Bates, and while you may not be humming any particular tune as you exit the theatre, you may find that you'll have a lighter step and a silly grin on your face all the way home.

*Top image: Samantha Eggers (center) with the company of the Ensemble Theatre Company's production of "JANE AUSTEN'S EMMA," book, music and lyrics by Paul Gordon, directed by Andrew Barnicle and now playing at the NEW VIC THEATRE in Santa Barbara.*

*Photos by David Bazemore*

**WHAT:** *Emma*

**WHERE:** New Vic Theatre, 33 West Victoria Street, Santa Barbara 93101

**WHEN:** Wednesdays-Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays 2 & 7pm. Added matinee Saturday, Feb. 15, 4pm; NO 7pm performance Sunday, Feb. 16. Ends Feb. 23.

**HOW:** Tickets \$67-\$77 (subject to change), available online at [etscb.org](http://etscb.org) or by phone 805.965.5400 x 115. Ages 20 & under: \$40. Student tickets: \$25. Group sales info at 805.965.5400. Senior discounts on demand.

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