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Stratford Music Man, Rocky Horror Celebrate Freedom

David Sheward · Wednesday, August 22nd, 2018

The Stratford Festival in Ontario includes musicals along with Shakespeare, classic and contemporary plays. Their current tuner offerings ran the gamut from traditional family fare (*The Music Man*) to outrageous sexual campiness (*The Rocky Horror Show*). Yet both exude a joyous love of the form and celebration of individuality. Perhaps because both are directed and choreographed by the same stager, Donna Feore, and tie in with the season's theme of freedom. You would hardly think the heroes of these two disparate shows have much in common, but their protagonists are passionate advocates for personal liberation. Professor Harold Hill, the charismatic con man of Meredith Willson's 1957 valentine to middle America, releases the Iowa-stubborn residents of apple-pie River City from their puritanical strictures while Dr. Frank N. Furter, the "sweet transvestite" ringleader of Richard O'Brien's 1970s cult phenomenon, rips the prudishness from his starched late-night guests Brad and Janet while indulging his own unlimited libido. In both productions, Feore joyously expresses this spirit of unconventionality with snappy staging and energetic dance.

Daren A. Herbert (right) and the cast of *The Music Man* at the Stratford Festival.
Credit: Cylla von Tiedemann

You might think *Rocky Horror* is the more daring of the two, but *Music Man* has its own rebellious inclinations. When it premiered, Willson's show won the Best Musical Tony Award over the-then radical *West Side Story*. Musical theater historians have seen this as a vote for a traditional Broadway musical template. Upon closer examination, Willson's score contains numerous innovations including the pre-rap, rhythmic talk number of the traveling salesmen, Hill's near-all spoken "Ya Got Trouble" and "The Sadder but Wiser Girl" (following the example of Higgins' solos in *My Fair Lady* which had opened a year earlier), and the "Piano Lesson" set to a scale exercise while imparting vital information about female lead Marion Paroo and the town's attitudes towards her. In addition, there are examples of two separate songs sung simultaneously and expressing conflicting or complementing emotions. This technique was often employed by Irving Berlin, and Willson works wonders with it.

Foere's elaborate production creates an entire community on Stratford's three-quarter Festival stage, with the aide of Michael Gianfrancesco's Fourth-of-July picnic set, Dana Osborne's delightful period costumes, and Michael Walton's sunny and romantic lighting. You feel as if these people really do live together and that Daren A. Herbert's irresistible Hill is a frighteningly attractive interloper. The fact that Herbert is black and most of the townspeople are white adds a tinge of tension to the usually cotton-candy proceedings. Herbert is a true triple threat, totally solid

in acting and singing the charming Hill, but also an able dancer, joining in fully with the chorus (led by the amazing Devon Michael Brown as Tommy and a pert Heather Kosik as Zaneeta). Danielle Wade skillfully charts Marion's journey from skepticism towards the stranger to romantic acceptance, yet retaining a degree of wariness. The two together send off sparks, particularly in the cleverly staged "Marian the Librarian" number where books carts, tables and reading teens are employed in Hill's pursuit of the resistant lady.

Daren A. Herbert and Danielle Wade in *The Music Man*.
Credit: Cylla von Tiedemann

Steve Ross nearly steals the show as the pompous Mayor with his precise comic timing and Blythe Wilson is delightfully daffy as his gullible wife. Kudos also to Mark Uhre who makes the most of the usually brushed-off role of Marcellus, Hill's accomplice. The success of this *Music Man* lies in the fact that Feore and her cast do not condescend to the denizens of River City. She and the company take the small-town values seriously, thus making Hill's presence a dynamic threat and a titillating thrill.

The same can be said for Feore's addictively raucous *Rocky Horror Show* (at the proscenium Avon Theatre) which is simultaneously satiric and sincere. This company, which has some overlaps with *The Music Man*, also plays it straight, though with the necessary exaggerations. They give O'Brien's outlandish creations three dimensions instead of the usual two.

Dan Chameroy and company in *The Rocky Horror Show*.
Credit: Cylla von Tiedemann

When it first premiered on Broadway in 1975 after a smash run in London, Broadway audiences were not ready for its whacked-out sensibility or its uninhibited attitude towards gender roles and sexual liberation. The show closed after only 45 performances. It was the film version, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, released the same year that turned the property into a cult classic. Fans loved the embrace of LGBT identity, O'Brien's parodistic rock score, and the myriad references to creaky old sci-fi and terror movies. *Rocky*-lovers attended midnight screenings dressed as the characters and acted out scenes in front of the screen.

Just as she brings an entire Midwestern town into being with *Music Man*, Feore, with the same set of designers, gives birth to a self-contained, thoroughly mad world inside Frank N. Furter's gothic-comic-book mansion. As that cross-dressing mad scientist, Dan Chameroy combines masculine aggressiveness with feminine seduction to form a commanding androgynous tempter/tress equal to the magnetic Harold Hill. Sayer Roberts and Jennifer Rider-Shaw are a riot as Brad and Janet, capturing their WASP-y stuffiness as well as their repressed passions. The highlight of the show is Frank's dual deflowering of the duo, staged in an upright bed with hilariously suggestive uses of the sheets. Robert Markus, Erica Peck and Kimberly-Ann Truong gobble up the roles of Frank's cohorts with dangerous, devouring glee while George Krissa has the requisite muscles and pipes for Rocky, the bodybuilder boy toy Frank vivifies in a satire of Frankenstein. As in *Music Man*, Steve Ross' dry delivery as the Narrator, grabs the spotlight. Whatever your taste in musicals, the Stratford Festival has you covered.

The Music Man: May 29—Nov. 3. Festival Theatre, 55 Queen St., Stratford, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 40 mins. including one intermission.

The Rocky Horror Show: June 2—Nov. 11. Avon Theatre, 99 Downie St. Stratford, Ontario. Running time: two hours including one intermission.

All productions: repertory schedule; $133—$24.50 (Canadian); (800) 567-1600 or www.stratfordfestival.ca.

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