

Encore

Tibbits 'Damn Yankees' has a lot of Heart

REVIEW July 08, 2017 David Kiley

COLDWATER, Mich.—When the ballplayers come out in *Damn Yankees* in the first act and sing, “Ya Gotta Have Heart,” it is one of those moments that should warm the hearts of almost any fan of baseball, summer and underdogs, no matter if you hate the Yankees, or love the Detroit Tigers, or have no idea who the Washington Senators were.

The Tibbits Opera House’s production of the musical, which debuted in 1955 at a time when the Yankees were dominating baseball with stars such as Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra and Whitey Ford. The show is based on the book, “The Year The Yankees Lost The Pennant.”

The story focuses on an aging real estate seller named Joe Boyd (Alan Elliott) who is a rabid fan of the perennially awful Washington Senators baseball team. After Joe’s wife, Meg, (Joylene Taylor) goes to bed, he stays up late, musing that if the Senators just had a “long ball hitter” they could beat “those damn Yankees.” And with that, suddenly, a smooth talking “Mr. Applegate”, aka The Devil, (Peter Riopelle) appears, and offers Joe the chance to become “Joe Hardy”, a young, slugger who can save his beloved Senators. He accepts, even though he must leave Meg to do it. However, Joe’s real estate dealing experience makes him insist on an escape clause. The Senators’ last game is on September 25, and if he plays in it, he is to stay as Joe Hardy forever. If not, he has until 9:00 the night before to walk away from the deal and return to his normal life.

Joe has a similar effect on the Senators that Roy Hobbs had on the fictional Knights baseball team in the film “The Natural”, starring Robert Redford. He hits for an impossibly high average, and pounds the baseball over the fence with almost comic-book scale. But Joe Hardy (Boyd) misses Meg, and returns to his home as a boarder to be closer to her, and to try and ease the burden of losing her husband to mysterious circumstances. Applegate, meantime, enlists his vamp, Lola (Maureen Duke) to try and seduce Hardy into forgetting Meg and persuading Joe to forget about his escape clause. Applegate wants Joe’s soul in this deal.

At the start of this *Damn Yankees*, I was a little worried. A couple of the actors were very pitchy in their singing at the start, and I thought we might be in for a long evening. But after the initial two songs, “Six Months Out of Every Year,” and “Goodbye, Old Girl,” the ensemble of summer stock actors came out and did the signature “Heart” song and restored faith in the national pastime. After that, even the actors who were wobbly at the start, settled down and were just fine the rest of the way.

Riopelle was practically born to play the reptilian Applegate/Devil, and delivers completely on the Lucifer role with comedic flair. After a bumpy start, Taylor really comes through on Meg through the rest of the play right up to the romantic redemptive climax. Jackson Mattek as Joe Hardy has a lovely voice and charming, heroic presence. Duke is every bit as sexy as Gwen Verdon, who originated the role on Broadway, and handles the dance and

vamp part of her role with great aplomb. And the ensemble of ball players, it must be said, do a great job as the optimistic underdogs who are carried to stardom by their mystery slugger. And, oh that song they get to sing!

In places, the choreography gets a wee bit muddy, and it appeared that a few lines went wandering from one of the actors. But none of that dampened the overall sweetness of the story, nor the nostalgia of the music. It should be said that Tibbits is one of the last professional theaters around to not use face or body microphones on their actors. At times, a couple of the actors who are probably used to being wired up for sound let their lyrics get lost in their lower register. But on the whole, it was refreshing to see good old fashioned non-electronic projection from actors in the Tibbits' fine space. It was like watching pro baseball players hit with wood bats again after watching college and high school players bat with aluminum bats.

Conductor/Music Director Lisa Lawrence led a four piece orchestra in the pit. And the show runs about 2.5 hours with a 12 minute intermission.

Damn Yankees may get a rap for being a "Moldy oldie" musical from another era like "South Pacific" or "Camelot." And for some, there will be some cringe-worthy of-the-period musical nods, such as "Goodbye Old Girl," as Joe gets ready to leave his wife. Really? It sounds like he is bidding goodbye to a dog that is about to be put to sleep. And the scene in which Lola tries to seduce Joe in the locker room while he is in his boxer shorts is campy.

On the other hand, the show is about baseball, love, redemption and loyalty. And it has a song that everyone in the audience was singing at the end of the show, and probably on the way home. And that makes for a nice night out in the theatre.

Read more about [*Damn Yankees* 07/06-07/15](#)