

ARTS COMMENTARY

'Thoroughly Modern Millie' is thoroughly marvelous

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Like any young woman, Millie Dillmount considers herself "thoroughly modern." She moves from small-town Kansas to New York City, undergoes a makeover and decides she's going to marry for money.

She isn't in the city long before she lands a job as stenographer for Trevor Graydon.

But even though he's a rich bachelor, Mr. Graydon unfortunately isn't as "modern" as Millie. He's rather old-fashioned, in fact. He wants to marry for love.

Imagine that.

"Thoroughly Modern Millie" may be set in the roaring '20s, but it's as current as today's reality shows.

Only a lot more fun.

Or, as Millie would say, it's so worthwhile.

The Naples Players' annual summer musical always seems like a gift to year-rounders, as if the troupe is saying, "We know the snow-birds have gone home and you're still here enduring a hot, sweltering summer: Here's something to make you glad you stay."

"Thoroughly Modern Millie" plays at the Sugden Community Theatre through July 25.

It's been an uneven past season for the Players, but they definitely have a hit on their hands with "Millie." The musical's set in a world full of bobs, fringe, the Charleston and speakeasys. What's not to like?

You can tell, from the very beginning, that director Dallas Dunnagan has guided this musical with her expertise. Everything is top-notch. And when the ensemble joins Millie onstage for the second number, "Thoroughly Modern Millie," you think to yourself: "This is going to be fun!"

Whitney Winfield's Millie is winsome and headstrong, a thoroughly likeable character. She possesses, to use an old-fashioned term, plenty of moxie. She knows what she wants, and she's going to go out and get it.

Early in the show, when she's just arrived in New York City, she meets Jimmy Smith (John McKerrow). He falls in love with her, but fights it.

Unfortunately, the two actors don't have much chemistry on stage. I would've liked to have seen more sparks, even

though the characters are trying to fight their feelings.

Though Mr. McKerrow's character has a certain earnest, boyish charm, at times, especially in the beginning, he comes across as a gangster rather than a New Yorker. He seems as if he'd be more comfortable in "Guys and Dolls." It's as if he's still trying to find his character.

Paul Graffy plays Mr. Graydon, Millie's object of affection, as pompous and a little stuffy. While dictating a letter to Millie, he sings at an incredible breakneck pace "The Speed Test," which is a Gilbert and Sullivan tune with new lyrics. And later, in Act II, in "Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life/I'm Falling in Love With Someone," he literally flutters about the stage as he declares his love.

It's wonderfully over-the-top, comic-book corny.

In fact, the entire show is.

And that's what makes it so much fun.

This show is not meant to be taken seriously. After all, the plot includes white slavery, hidden identities and a hotel elevator that works if you tap dance in it.

Millie finds shelter at the Hotel Priscilla, a place where young girls wanting to become actresses stay. The establishment is run by Mrs. Meers (Ellen Cooper), who makes the most of society's tendency to ignore minorities. A has-been actor, Mrs. Meers is frustrated by being overlooked and so turns her "invisibility" into an advantage.

Ms. Cooper is terrific in this role, sashaying about, bossing around Ching Ho (Vinnie Santiago) and Bun Foo (Joseph Yazvac) and even singing "Mammy" in Chinese.

Rachel Ewy plays Miss Dorothy Brown, another aspiring young actress, whom Millie befriends. Ms. Ewy portrays the innocent young woman without being sickeningly sweet, and shows off her considerable voice in a duet with Mr. Graffy.

And Mary Anne McAvoy McKerrow portrays Muzzy, a filthy rich nightclub singer who has a diva's sense of grandeur. It's a lush, luxurious role, and Ms. McKerrow makes the most of it.

Special mention must be made of Beverly Canell, (Millie's dour boss, Miss Flannery.) She seems to be The Naples Players' reliable go-to person for perpetually unhappy characters, and it's easy to see why; no one can glower like Ms. Cannell, who acts as if lives on a diet of lemons.

The solos in this production are strong, and the ensemble numbers equally so. When the entire cast is on stage, singing and dancing, it's riveting.



COURTESY PHOTO

"Thoroughly Modern Millie" plays at the Sugden Community Theatre through July 25.

Actors in musicals usually fall in one of two categories: movers or dancers. Choreographer Dawn Lebrecht Fornara has taken a group of movers and transformed them into dancers, whether they're doing a drunken Charleston in a speakeasy or tap dancing en masse. That is an admirable accomplishment, especially in community theater.

The orchestra, led by musical director Charles Fornara, is great, but at times overpowers the singers. The sound balance needs to be fixed, with either more amplification for some of the singers or an orchestra that plays softer.

Costume designer Dot Auchmoody obviously had fun dressing this musical. At times, the main characters are in color, while the ensemble is dressed in black and white. The only misstep is Mrs. Meers' Chinese gown, which seems too big and too long for her; the proportions don't seem right. But that's a quibble. Carol Smith was in charge of the musical's many wigs, turning 21st century women into roaring '20s girls with bobbed hair.

Matt Flynn's minimal sets are impres-

sionistic more than realistic, though I couldn't help wondering why a skyscraper's ledge was painted in an odd splotchy green color. (And on opening night, the crew seemed to have difficulty getting some of the sets in place quickly, particularly the drops.)

"Thoroughly Modern Millie" is non-stop fun from beginning to end. Especially outstanding are "Forget About the Boy" with tap dancing stenographers and "The Nutty Cracker Suite," set in a speakeasy, and the hilarious police lineup that follows.

Millie comes to New York to conquer the big city; in doing so, she'll also conquer your heart. ■

If you go

- >>What: "Thoroughly Modern Millie"
- >>When: through July 25
- >>Where: The Sugden Community Theatre, 701 5th Avenue South, Naples
- >>Cost: \$30 (students through 18 years of age, \$10)
- >>Info: Call 263-7990 or go to www.naplesplayers.org.

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