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Bucks County Playhouse Review: 'Guys and Dolls'

By Neal Zoren

From the time I glanced at a lobby card announcing that Lesli Margherita was coming to New Hope's Bucks County Playhouse as Adelaide in "Guys and Dolls," my eagerness to see the production was unusually without bounds.

Jaded as I can be to casting, remembering Margherita's stunningly versatile performance in a London musical, "Zorro" — yes, "Zorro," as in he who makes the sign of the "Z" — I wanted to see if she would bring to same mixture of humor, sexiness, and pathos to Adelaide.

Margherita did not disappoint. Her Adelaide is a well-carved precious gem, filled with nuance and facets that let the actress show off, indulge even, her personal bag of tricks while wittily and touchingly fulfilling the requirements of one of musical theater's favorite characters.

Name it, and Margherita excels in it. Her timing is impeccable. She can measure any line — comic, angry, hurt, or screwball — for total impact and even surprise. She can generate laughs and tears from one look. Her voice ranges from the typical Adelaide squeak to basso profundo with the ease and skill of a 101-piece symphony orchestra. She can stop the show with a single utterance, so when she has a number, the delight, the very treat of having Margherita on stage, increases exponentially.

Her "Adelaide's Lament" should be recorded, even if by bootleg, for YouTube posterity. It shows the range of Margherita's repertory, being smart, funny, and touching all at once. When Margherita does a short coda of the song later in the show, your heart breaks for Adelaide's pain, which dominates Frank Loesser's hilarious lyrics to convey what the human, and not archetypical, Adelaide is feeling. And that we feel right along with her.

Without Margherita, Hunter Foster's production would be a hit rating cheers and standing ovations. The good news is Margherita's brilliance does not eclipse to the point you can't appreciate the wealth of fine work displayed on the BCP stage.

Foster seems to have harnessed the flaw that softened praise for some of his earlier production for the Playhouse. His taste and judgment have been honed. He no longer seems to throw in any idea that

comes to him. This discrimination heightens what he does provide, verve peppered liberally with comic sight gags that pay. He makes a butter churn in "Bushel and a Peck" an accessory to a rollicking bit. Small moments like Gen. Cartwright, the head of the Salvation Army, snatching \$1,000 from Nathan Detroit's hand as a donation when he shows it to Sister Sarah to prove he won a bet with Sky Masterson bring rib-tickling dividends.

Then there are Margherita's cast mates. Elena Shaddow is a marvelous Sister Sarah Brown. Beyond her soaring soprano that accentuates the beauty of Loesser's songs, Shaddow finds the right notes between prim and realistic. Her Sarah is totally human. She is comfortable speaking her mind. She is loose enough to have wholesome fun even before Sky plies her with serial dolce de leches in Havana. Shaddow is wonderful in all of here scenes, but when she teams with Margherita for "Marry the Man Today," musical theater gold is spun. Not only do their different styles mesh, but their voices blend beautifully, and you bask in the professionalism of submerging characters to the music and find joy in a special harmony.

Lenny Wolpe ranks about the most reliable character actors in current theater. His Arvide Abernathy, a careerist in the Salvation Army, is not sanctimonious or dour. He is worldly and has a grand sense of humor. Again, he registers as a total human being instead of a type. His rendition of "More I Cannot Wish You" is moving. His warning to Sky about fulfilling a promise is shrewdly done.

Ruth Gottschall shows great practicality and business sense as General Cartwright, and not only by grabbing Nathan's grand.

Deft supporting turns abound. Brendan Averett, Chicago accent and all, goes beyond the obvious in his portrayal of a notoriously murderous gangster, Big Jule. Darius de Haas is sweetly funny as Nicely Nicely Johnson and does a bang-up job with "Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat. Blakely Slaybaugh is a good match for de Haas as Benny Southstreet. One ensemble member, Adam Vanek, not only pops up in multiple roles but makes each one count memorably. Vanek is also an attention-getting dancer who brings extra oomph to Jeremy Dumont's lively choreography.

Steve Rosen finds the irony in Nathan Detroit, a hard-working guy who just happens to run an illegal crap game, although why voluntary gambling is illegal stymies me. Rosen's Nathan and Margherita's Adelaide have a great rapport. You believe they have been engaged for 14 years.

Clarke Thorell, as Sky, is the wildcard in the cast. Any character can look any way, but I had to work at overcoming Thorell not matching my idea of Sky. He seems more like an Iowa insurance salesman with a penchant for gambling than a man who flies to Havana for dinner and has a sophisticated acquaintance with the world in general. Also, he didn't seem to relate to Shaddow with the chemistry Loesser's lyrics mention several times, and his voice isn't as full or refined as Shaddow's, Margherita's, de Haas', or Wolpe's.

In spite of this, Thorell grew on me as the production proceeded. I got used to his offhand delivery as Sky and saw a character able to handle himself in any situation but is not really sociable or at home in a crowd, let alone a mob.

Of course, Margherita et al have the great material book writers Abe Burrows and Jo Swerling provide, in addition to Loesser's sterling score.

Argue if you must, but comedy writing was sharper and more laden with adult wit in the 1950s than it is today, when the big payoffs seem too framed and self-conscious. Burrows and Swerling knew how to craft laughs that grew organically from their colorful characters. The humor is smart instead of brash, clever and in keeping with the moment instead of raucous for raucous sake. Hunter Foster and company make the most of the gift "Guys and Dolls" bestows upon any director. Ballads get as much care and Miss Adelaide's show pieces. Comedy is interspersed with moments of warmth and thoughtfulness.

Foster's is a great production of a great show made greater because of the consummate artistry of one Lesli Margherita. BCP makes this a good time to catch up with this classic.

Guys and Dolls, Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope, Pennsylvania. Through Saturday, August 12. \$40 to \$85. 215-862-2121 or www.bcptheater.org.