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Jean Brenner: Review ——— “Cake Off” at Bucks Playhouse is sweet treat

Bucks County’s “Idol” is back on stage at the Bucks County Playhouse and is better than ever before in the new musical, “Cake Off.”

Justin Guarini is outstanding, outshining even himself in “Company” and “It’s a Wonderful Life” radio play at BCP, in this new, delightful, hysterically funny six-character, four-person production as he humorously portrays three different people, the emcee and two women.

“Cake Off” opened last Saturday night to a crowd of appreciative theater fans who could not – would not – stop laughing, applauding and chortling delightedly. The show is a rousing success.

First, Guarini is unexpectedly hilariously funny in assuming the persona of TV host Jack DeVault ... perhaps emulating one he knew quite well?

Second, he plays the role of Millbury competitor Lenora Cass who comes to talk with Rita Gaw during a break, and third, he impersonates the 1962 Millbury winner, Nancy DeMarco, who comes to give Rita advice about how to win the competition ... how to be more well-liked by being more feminine and by appearing less intelligent.

In each of these two female roles, Guarini’s top half is costumed as a woman. He is right on target with each role, embellished with aprons, handbags and wigs, and wearing women’s shoes with



Justin Guarini returns to Bucks County Playhouse with Euan Morton, Michele Ragusa and Aidan J. Lawrence (not shown) for “Cake Off,” a new musical by Sheri Wilner, Julia Jordan and Adam Gwon.

heels – all the while showing seriously good humor before quickly switching back to the role of emcee DeVault.

But, the sweet-tooth satisfaction of this musical is not only about Guarini’s talents; the other three singer-actors are outstanding in their roles.

Michele Ragusa as Rita Gaw sings fantastic songs and duets as she bakes a mean cake in the 1996 Millbury \$1 million contest. Rita understands the chemistry of cooking and wants to win.

Her role is that of every woman who knows she is equal to or better than a man competitor, but who has paid dearly for displaying her intelligence both in her marriage, now failed, and as a well-qualified competitor for a job against a man of lesser “baking” talent.

Paul Hubbard is Rita’s worthy opponent in the Millbury Kitchen, where the TV show is being produced live. Euan Morton portrays Paul, a dotting father who wants so much to be a good dad that he bakes cakes with his son to enjoy

together time.

Their chocolate mint cake is good enough to win them a place in the final competition in a contest in which they are to be baking together, but his son, Wyatt, is at the rebellious stage and will not participate. The reasons are complicated, but devastating to his dad.

Morton’s characterization and singing are strong and believable. His solos and his duets with Ragusa are excellent.

Even the youngest member of the cast, Aidan J. Lawrence, has a range of experience, including in regional and community theater, and in dance. Lawrence did a fine characterization of Wyatt Hubbard.

The cast had just two weeks to rehearse, something often done in summer theater, but this show is previewing at Bucks County Playhouse. Rewrites are happening frequently, and there were a few symptoms of just how new the script was to the actors as a couple of slip-ups were handled nicely by truly professional performers.

For instance, on opening night, Ragusa forgot to pre-set a cell phone in her handbag. A stage crew member handed her one. It was so natural and Ragusa is so experienced, she handled it as though it were meant to be that way.

An “eggstastically” funny food fight ensues in Act II. In her anger and dismay, Rita throws eggs and

chunks of cake at Jack DeVault, who she sees as her male enemy. Paul joins the fray to support Rita. Dish towels are thrown; tier cakes are destroyed. It is a sight to behold.

Throughout the musical, there is the thread of feminism, which works just fine. The message is pretty clear.

But then, the final song comes and while it is sung beautifully by Ragusa, it is one song too long. The point has been made. It is superfluous. While the writers are still writing, they need to find a different ending. The show calls for something uplifting, not plaintive.

All of the performers have many, many substantial credits, and credit must be given to the talented, creative writers: Adam Gwon, who wrote the music and co-wrote the lyrics, Julia Jordan, co-lyricist and co-book writer; and Sheri Wilner, playwright, original play and co-book writer; as well as Gaye Taylor Upchurch, director.

Credit also goes to the stage manager and crew, who make everything roll smoothly and clean up broken eggs and cake from the stage between acts and after each performance.

“Cake Off” continues at Bucks County Playhouse, with eight performances a week until Sept. 10. For tickets, visit bcptheater.org or call 215-862-2121.

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“Cake Off,” through Sep. 10.
Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main
St., New Hope. buckscountyplyhouse.org. Tickets: 215-862-2121.