



Lakewood's 'The Producers': Laugh-o-rama that just keeps on giving Posted July 12, 2009 21:00PM

Some of us have long avoided the musical version of "The Producers," those of us, at least, who love the 1968 Mel Brooks movie and couldn't imagine it possibly improved upon. However, more of Brooks can't be anything but good, and because he wrote the lyrics and composed the tunes for the 2001 hit musical about the making of a musical, there's simply more to like in this gloriously raucous, in-your-face comedy, currently in performance at the Lakewood Theatre.

Shows about life in the theater often take on extra sparkle and resonance, an extra layer of self-knowledge and irony. "The Producers" does this splendidly, and in typical Brooksonian fashion also spoofs an array of stereotypes. There's the blond Swedish bombshell, the unbalanced Nazi waiting to blow a fuse, the flamboyant gay director, the mild-mannered accountant, the brazen, greasy producer eager to cook the books and get rich. If you're politically correct all down the line, this show may not be for you. If you own a broad, deep sense of humor, this is sheer theater heaven, a laugh-o-rama that just keeps on giving.

What saves the characters from being cardboard cutouts is their humanity in an out-of-control world that's totally unpredictable, a world in which putting on a show, whether it's on Broadway or in Sing Sing, is a measure of life being lived at its fullest.

In Lakewood's strong, often-dazzling production, director Alan Shearman, a long-time comedy master who co-created and starred in the 1970s hit "Bullshot Crummond," has pulled together an amazing cast and doled out plenty of great stage business. You don't have to look like Nathan Lane to play the part of impresario Max Bialystock (which won Lane kudos on Broadway), but I swear local actor Jay Pevney resembles Lane, and he even looks like a young Zero Mostel at times. Pevney's Max is a petite powerhouse, raging and exulting, planning and scheming, with bemused, mild-mannered accountant Leo Bloom (Todd Tschida) in tow.

A quick plot synopsis: When the two decide the only way to make money is to produce a really rotten musical on Broadway ("We Can Do It"), they go in search of an awful play and an even worse director. "Springtime for Hitler" by former Nazi Franz Liebkind (Burl Ross) is in such bad taste they figure the audience will walk out.

Director Roger DeBris, a delectable, over-the-top sketch by veteran actor Tim Smith, will camp up the show to ruin it further, the producers figure. Then they can report a giant loss to the tax man, and take the investors' money. Of course, the opposite occurs, and they've got a hit on their hands. They lament their success in the duet "Where Did We Go Right?"

Ross and Smith create perhaps the two most interesting characters in Brooks' wacky world of theater. Ross, a professional mime and clown, is sweet-faced no matter how hard he tries to look stern and commanding as the Nazi, and this works against type.

Smith keeps the oh-so-gay DeBris sophisticated and restrained a la Noel Coward, even when we first meet him in drag. So when he cuts loose on stage as the crooning Hitler figure, we're in for a surprise. Both are tall, so they steal the stage from the get-go, whether they're swathed in lederhosen or sequins. Another vibrant secondary character, perhaps the biggest stereotype of all, is Ulla the Swedish bombshell, played with unself-conscious vigor by Sara Catherine Wheatley, who starred in "Always. . .Patsy Cline" at Broadway Rose earlier this year.

The juiciest bit, of course, is the show within the show, "Springtime for Hitler," neatly staged by Shearman and choreographer Erin Shannon. Showgirls in headdresses of giant beer steins and sausages come down the ramp, and Hitler youth in uniform dance in Busby Berkeley formations.

And in an equally stunning number, "Along Came Bialy," little old ladies, Max's investors, put down their walkers and tap-dance in a glorious number that closes the first act. "The Producers" earned 12 Tony awards, a record-breaking number. One can see why. The musical is not suitable for children because of language and some content.

-- Holly Johnson: