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'Anyone Can Whistle' Opens at SMC

By Lou Fancher



Cast members Michael Craigen, Tim Hernandez, and Quinci Waller Photo provided

In one of Broadway's briefest here and gone debuts, composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim's sophomore turn, "Anyone Can Whistle," had only nine performances.

Opening on April 4, 1964, the musical satire based on a book by Arthur Laurents arrived with an already checkered past - star Angela Lansbury voiced sincere doubts about the script and even Sondheim said it had serious flaws. The production earned a bad review from the hugely influential New York Times. As sometimes happens with films, the Broadway bomb became a cult classic, but not one with as much caché as major league hits like "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," "Grease," and similar classics.

Which makes its selection as the fall production for the Performing Arts Department of Saint Mary's College an unusual, ambitious choice. Unfortunately, while the musical reveals there's real talent in the student body - and obvious

enthusiasm throughout the cast - the flawed production arrives with a confusing agenda. And at over two hours and with a demanding score, it could use a nip and tuck to tighten the pacing and occasionally, the vocal challenges stretch beyond the casts' still-developing voices.

The show tells the story of a town that's facing bankruptcy and the corrupt town leaders who fake a miracle - water from a rock - to save it. Mayor Cora Hoover Hooper (a saucy, commanding Quinci Waller) and her primary cohort, Comptroller Schub (the agile Michael Craigen), lead residents to the water, but confusion reigns when inmates from the Cookie Jar, a local mental asylum of misfits, mingle with townspeople and tourists. Into the mix come two characters destined to fall in love, J. Bowden Hapgood, a psychiatrist who isn't really a psychiatrist (played with flair and charm by Ollie Reyes) and Fay Apple, a Cookie Jar nurse who later disguises herself as a miracle verifier sent from Lourdes (the strong-voiced Olivia Hass). It's no surprise that eventually, the hoax is uncovered, the town leaders dream up their next deception (politicians receive no mercy from Sondheim's stabbing libretto), the fallible residents race to the next, rumored miracle (townspeople are also sacrificed in the satire) and the two lovers are left to kiss and hope for a better tomorrow.

In director Frank Murray's program notes, the production's time frame has been moved to 2008-09, aiming at "another period of political collusion and economic crisis." While there's no argument with bringing more relevancy to a musical that comes across as sexist, one-dimensional in its handling of the mentally ill community and bordering on outdated in the scoring of some musical numbers, references to Ferguson, Mo., involving the shooting of an unarmed black man by a white law enforcement officer on Aug. 9, 2014, appear in obvious error. How could this tragic occurrence enter a play set in 2009? Even a mention of the fatal shooting of Oscar Grant on New Year's Day in 2009 feels like a questionable smuggling in of contemporary issues, especially when paired with interactions and costuming that are throwbacks to the '60s. The result is a confusion of purpose and perhaps deciding to set the production in its original time frame - or thrust it wholeheartedly into today - would have been more effective.

Even so, the student cast and live music from Danelle B. Johnson (piano), Jeffa Cook (electric piano) and Eli Kirmayer (drums) bring undeniable energy to the stage.

Show highlights come from Hass, rendering with particular grace the soulful "Anyone Can Whistle" and Reyes, bouncing joyfully while proving barriers are built to be broken with "Everybody Says Don't." Murray and choreographer Tiffany Davis stage the action with keen eyes; never over-animating the exaggerated characters and admirably shining light on the casts' budding talents. "Anyone Can Whistle" runs through Nov. 9.

Performances are Nov. 7 and 8 at 8 p.m. and Nov. 9 at 2 p.m. in LeFevre Theatre on the SMC campus. General admission: \$15; seniors (65+) \$12; non-SMC students \$12; Saint Mary's College faculty, staff and students \$10. For further information and reservations please call the Saint Mary's College Theatre Box Office at (925) 631-4670. Tickets are also available online at www.brownpapertickets.com.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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