

NORTHPORT MUSIC THEATER

Inaugural 'Musical' blends best of old, new

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The Northport Music Theater is the newest performing arts organization in the mid-coast area, but the small black-box venue feels very old — in a good way. The building, located

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about six miles south of Belfast on U.S. Route 1, is a refurbished industrial repair shop, and the 136 vintage seats are from a theater in Amherst, Mass.

That's not why the place feels historical. What Northport Music Theater manages to do with its inaugural show is create a nostalgic sense of summer-stock theater in Maine. It's not fancy. It's not pretentious. And it certainly isn't high-tech.

But in its simple celebration of musical theater talent and charm, Northport is a throwback to the type of theaters one imagines taking place a century ago when even well-known performers fled New York City for the cooler coast of Maine.

And yet, the theater also has a contemporary edge. The setting is traditional — a small, modified proscenium stage flanked by seats. But the programming is dedicated to new musicals, a growing and rich genre in today's theater.

Founded by Ruth and John Gelsinger, a wife-and-husband co-founding artistic team and long-standing members of the music scene in the area, Northport will offer three contemporary musical shows this season. To underscore the spirit of their new place, the Gelsingers launched their can-do enterprise with a smart and sassy show, "The Musical of Musicals (The Musical!)," a satire of musical theater and an off-Broadway hit in 2003.

Written by Eric Rockwell and Joanne Bogart and directed locally by Tobin Malone, the piece is a sendup of Broadway's most beloved — and easily spoofed — musicals.

The premise of the show is that a helpless woman is about to be evicted from her apartment because she can't pay the rent. Her dilemma, complete with a hero, villain and older mentor, is spun through five cycles, or micromusicals, based on the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein ("Corn"), Stephen Sondheim ("A Little Complex"), Jerry Herman ("Dear Abby"), Andrew Lloyd Webber ("Aspects of Juanita") and Kander and Ebb ("Speak Easy").

To anyone who isn't of the musical persuasion, the show will simply be an entertaining song-and-dance revue staged by immensely talented singer-actors Roger Marcotte, Caitlin Whalen, Jason Wilkes and Dagny Ernest, accompanied elegantly by Ruth Gelsinger on piano.

Serious musical theater aficionados will find much, much more in the show. Because the playing field is so rich and vast, nearly every line has a shimmer of parody, and while collective laughter frequently filled this small theater on opening night, the occasional outburst of individual or

small-group laughter revealed hard-core musical geeks in the audience.

Some lines, such as, "Oh, what beautiful corn!" (mocking "Oklahoma!"), "It might just sound a teeny like something by Puccini" (poking fun at Webber), and rhyming "easy" with "Socrates-y" (a la Sondheim) goofed composers, and other lines jabbed audiences that so readily applaud set changes and blindly tolerate endless reprisals.

Northport Music Theater strikes the right balance between a retro love of musicals and the fresh new material on the market today. The only glitch in the production is the faux-glitz costuming by Wendy Schweikert. The loose-fitting, too often overly revealing outfits are universally unflattering to the four performers, who would have benefited from basic black outfits and a variety of wearable props (such as the glittery cape and mask in the "Phantom of the Opera" scenes). This could be easily corrected immediately without much adjustment for the performers. It might even allow them to engage in Keith Robinson's lampooning choreography with more freedom, and it would bump the show up to a higher level of professionalism.

Northport Music Theater is off to an impressive start. If the founders can maintain this level of talent and honesty throughout the season, they surely will become a welcome stop on the summer season theater map.