

Fame Takes a Holiday

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'Fame' is a cabaret old chum



When they signed on for the show, the four women who compose the cast of "Fame Takes a Holiday," the Northport Music Theater's first production of its 2008 season, were most likely not aware of the fact that they would have to learn the specialized art of plate spinning. Or that they'd be asked to sing a song to a stuffed chimpanzee. Or prance around in their underwear onstage.

Then again, Kim Murphy, Annie Watson, Dagny Ernest and Alyssa Manzi seem game for just about anything. And they would have to be since "Fame" is a zany, over-the-top musical comedy about a four-woman cabaret act that's slowly rolling off the tracks. It premieres Wednesday, July 2, and runs through Sunday, July 20, with performances daily Wednesday through Sunday. The other two musicals this season, "Closer Than Ever" and "Five Course Love," premiere on July 30 and Aug. 27, respectively.



Director Peter Cain confers with actresses (top from left) Alyssa Manzi, Dagny Ernest, Kim Murphy and Annie Watson during a recent rehearsal of "Fame Takes a Holiday." (Photos by Alex Morrow)

theatrical workout for the actresses, who spend virtually every minute onstage during the two-hour performance.

"You've got these four women who have this old-school cabaret act. In the first act, they're in a nightclub in Manhattan. In the second, they're in a Masonic Hall in Perth Amboy, N.J.

Director Peter Clain readily admits that it's a major

Needless to say, things aren't going well," said Clain.

You've got Polly (Murphy), the unofficial leader of the pack; Dede (Ernest), the creative one; Lavender (Manzi), the innocent sweetheart; and Crystal (Watson), who's the back-stabbing diva. With songs that parody everything from Edith Piaf to bossa nova, "Fame" tells the story of the tests their friendships undergo, as their careers wax and wane and their fortunes fade.

"It's definitely a challenge, being able to absorb all these different styles. You've got Andrews Sisters-style songs, and then you've got Jewish Borscht Belt humor," said Ernest. "It's kind of a roller coaster."

With 12-15 costume changes over the course of the show, it's a challenge just to remember when to put on the military uniforms and when to wear the bathing suits. Add to that the fact that they're all changing onstage, and, well, here's hoping nothing too unintentionally revealing occurs.

"We're hoping to avoid any major wardrobe malfunctions," said Murphy.

Northport Music Theater is in its second season; co-directors Ruth and John Gelsinger have carefully declared the 2007 inaugural season a success. People in the midcoast area know they're there (it's hard to miss the big, Pepto-Bismol-pink building off Route 1). Now it's time to establish Northport as one of the few regional theater destinations in the eastern half of the state — and the only one that does strictly musical theater.

It's also a way to keep local theater talent in state.

"Why should a kid who studied theater in college have to wait tables during the summer?" said Ruth Gelsinger, who accompanies each show on piano. "This is our way to focus on Maine talent, and to combat the brain-drain issue."

The Gelsingers and many of the cast members have long-standing relationships with community theater throughout the area; many of the actors this season have appeared in productions with the Belfast Maskers, Camden Civic Theatre, Winterport Open Stage and the Penobscot Theatre.

"We have such a great community of talent to work with," said Gelsinger. "And community theater is what gives birth to regional theater."

The second show this season, "Closer Than Ever," is directed by the Penobscot Theatre's Scott R.C. Levy, in his first non-PTC directing gig since arriving in Maine in 2005. "Closer" is a revue of songs by the 1980s Broadway collaborative team of David Shire and Richard Maltby Jr.

"The music I remember from college. It's one of those show-tune albums I'd listen to all the time," said Levy. "They're story songs, mostly about romantic relationships, involving people in their 30s and 40s. It's very intelligent and intimate."

"Five Course Love," the final of the three productions, is a series of five vignettes featuring

three actors portraying a man, a woman and a waiter in five differently themed restaurants: a Texas barbecue, an Italian trattoria, a German cabaret, a Mexican cantina and an American diner. It's charming, it's romantic, and, like "Fame Takes a Holiday," it's fast-paced and funny.

All three of the shows this season were originally off- or off-off- Broadway productions. The decision to produce lesser-known shows was made for two reasons: a way to keep costs down, and a way to highlight the work of playwrights and songwriters who audiences would otherwise probably never encounter.

"These are shows that are so rarely performed, and yet, I think people will be surprised and delighted by their quality," said Gelsinger. "The challenge was to find really good material, that's light and amusing but also engaging. I think we did that."

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"Fame Takes a Holiday" runs from July 2-20, with performances at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday and 3:30 p.m. on Sunday. "Closer Than Ever" runs July 30-Aug. 17, and "Five Course Love" runs Aug. 27-Sept. 14, both with the same Wednesday-Sunday schedule. Tickets are \$26 for evening shows, \$21 for matinees and \$18 each for groups of 15 or more. For information, visit www.northportmusictheater.com. Emily Burnham can be reached at eburnham@bangordailynews.net.

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