

The Post Journal Jamestown, New York

Thursday, August 18, 2005

‘The Music Man’ Should Be Delightful For Weekend Crowds

By ROBERT W. PLYLER

CHAUTAUQUA – Chautauqua Opera ventures into the realm of the American musical comedy this week with a production of Meredith Willson’s popular *The Music Man*.

The show is the story of Professor Harold Hill, a flim-flam man, who goes from town to town convincing the residents to purchase musical instruments and uniforms so he can form a boy’s band then skips town with the money. He’s prepared to do the same for River City, Iowa.

At first, the town’s librarian, who is also the town’s piano teacher, is determined to unmask the phony, but when she sees that suddenly people in town are singing and dancing and reading the books in the library instead of criticizing them unread, she decides that a bit of snake oil can make a town’s wheels turn much better than they did before.

Sometimes opera companies can over-sing musical comedies. Witness the

famed duets between Placido Domingo and John Denver. But Director Jay Lesenger has staged the real drama in the script, given the plot a genuine threat, which is often a weakness of musicals, and found a conductor – Braden Toan – who could get the orchestra to loosen up and groove through the music.

George Dvorsky is tall and handsome enough to leave no doubt that he could sell musical instruments to hard-nosed farmers and their pinchpenny wives. He sings well, although at Wednesday’s dress rehearsal he had a number of microphone problems. He dances well, also. An unexpected treat for Wednesday’s audience was the performance of Deborah Selig as Marian, the famed librarian. The role was announced to be performed by Rebecca Baxter, but Ms. Baxter injured her back and was unable to perform. Ms. Selig stepped in at the last moment, and performed with wonderful presence and visible confidence, including acting, singing and dancing.

A note of special praise for James Ivey, chairman of the

Department of Theater and Dance at the State University at Fredonia. He played the salesman who had been tarred and feathered by angry citizens who had been cheated by Hill, and who was determined to get revenge by destroying the con man’s game.

I’ve seen the menace of this role underplayed so often, it was good to see it done with gusto. Hasty praise to Joe Vincent as the town’s mayor, Carolann Page as the mayor’s battle axe wife, to Kolina Janneck and Russell Fischer as the mayor’s teenaged daughter and her boyfriend from the wrong side of the tracks, and to the show’s famed barbershop quartet of Beau Gibson, Christopher Clayton, Matthew Pena and Christopher Job.

Ron Kadri’s sets are delightful. They are minimal, but leave no question as to where a scene takes place, and they change in moments, giving the whole production a forward energy which is much enjoyed by the audience.

I thought it was a great good time at the theater.