Trinity’s Lend Me a Tenor offers lightweight laughs

LEND ME A TENOR
Written by Ken Ludwig
Directed by Tony Giordano.
Starring Jonathan Fried and Keith Jochim.
At Trinity Repertory Theatre.
Through Sept. 13.

By Chris Roberge

For those who consider lighthearted laughs and a noticeable lack of depth traits that “quality” theater should avoid at all costs, the current production of Lend Me a Tenor at the Trinity Repertory Theatre in Providence, R.I., would probably be a performance best avoided. But for those whose tastes are not restrained by such foolish prejudices, this Tony-nominated comedy by Ken Ludwig features enough important mishap, mistaken identities, and mis-placed corpses to keep all but the most finicky audiences entertained. Thanks mainly to a nearly perfect cast and crew under the direction of Lend Me a Tenor, Trinity Rep manages to breathe life into this play.

The plot of Lend Me a Tenor revolves around the attempts of the Cleveland Opera Guild in 1934 to survive a production of Otello. Many of the people involved with the company, such as the mezzo-soprano Maggie (Patricia Dunnock), eagerly await the arrival of the man they idolize. But, fortunately, director Giordano never realizes after a series of bizarre encounters. The hyperbolic turns by the performers are no match for the farcical pace and over-the-top qualities pushed to the forefront, making the performances of Trinity’s production are the equal of the scores that followed. 

The hyperbolic turns by the performers are echoed by the equally overstated sets and costumes designed for the play. William Lane’s costumes provide a good deal of humor to the visually stylish production. Tito Merelli (Keith Jochim), sees Tito as a vulnerable tool to use in getting to more glamorous cities than Cleveland.

The cast of Lend Me a Tenor is uniformly excellent, as all of the actors give performances that would be in danger of seeming exaggerated in other plays, but are comic treasures here. In the leading role of Max, Fried is extremely likable as he provides a convincingly clumsy outward appearance while always hinting at the endearance and enthusiasm that the character later proves capable of.

Dunnock’s Maggie is wonderfully funny with her wide-eyed naivity and determined desire to have a few “flings” rather than to settle for the apparently mundane Max. Timothy Crowe does the flashiest job of the players, and turns the hilariously single-minded Saunders into the most audience-pleasing character. His Saunders is a man who seems to have no interference with his precious production, including unforeseen fatalities, as nothing more than cruel attacks on his potential financial boon. And Keith Jochim, who has returned to the United States from Japan to play the role of the opera star whom Saunders refers to as “Il Stupendo,” taps into all of the humorous fears and foibles of the tenor. Justifiably terrified by the string of unexpected events that befell him in the strange world of Cleveland, his Tito is extremely enterprising. He takes a look at what’s happening...

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