

Tulane Summer Lyric's 'The Music Man' endures as a piece of entertaining Americana

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Bradley Troll, The Times-Picayune

It's been more than 50 years since those 76 trombones first led the big parade, and yet Meredith Willson's "The Music Man" somehow remains rousing and relevant. The piece of family-friendly Americana closes out the 43rd season of Summer Lyric Theatre at Tulane University on a high note.



Upon arriving in River City, Iowa, "Professor" Harold Hill, (Christopher Carey) a con man posing as a music teacher, must convince the "Iowa Stubborn" townspeople that their young boys are facing moral decay that can be thwarted only by the formation of a boys' marching band. Duping the locals poses no challenge for the slick salesman. But when librarian/piano teacher Marian, (Betsy Uschkrat) the town's intellectual black sheep, begins to suspect that the stranger has little musical knowledge, Hill finds himself in danger of losing his money and his heart.



Under director and choreographer Diana Lala, there's no trouble in River City. The energetic cast provides small-town charm and beautifully executes Lala's lively choreography, bringing life to familiar songs such as "The Wells Fargo Wagon," "Seventy-six Trombones" and "Marian the Librarian."

Leading the cast is music man Christopher Carey as Hill. With charisma and a booming baritone, Carey dances that fine line between sleazy and endearing that makes Hill such an enduring character. David W. Hoover, showcasing his comedic mastery once again this season, is a hoot as Marcellus Washburn, Hill's partner in crime. Hoover's "Shipooopi" is a playful highlight. The school board quartet, played by **Johnnie Oufnac, Joseph Jacquat, Hansen Eschete and Karl Hanson** (*Southern Tradition Quartet*), is dead-on harmonic merriment. Robert Pavlovich, Francine Segal and Jenn Marks, as the mayor, his wife and daughter, are a charming comedic trio.



Betsy Uschkrat has her moments as loner librarian Marion Paroo. Though Uschkrat is a vocal powerhouse, her solos often become indulgent belt-offs instead of opportunities to reveal character. Songs such as "Goodnight, My Someone" and "My White Knight" are crafted to reveal vulnerability, but Uschkrat is unable to connect emotionally to Marian's yearning -- until her heartfelt "Til There Was You."

Julie Winn's colorful costume design incorporates some oversized elements creating an amusing sense of whimsy. The set, designed by Rick Paul, is blithe and clever, bringing in the various locales of River City bordered by a winding railroad map on the proscenium. With beautiful touches, such as streaks of dusky orange and spotlights of lovers blue, Peter Pfeil's lighting design is a delight.

Though it might be easy to think of "The Music Man" as dated, many themes still hit close to home. Hill's fear-mongering control of the townspeople by creating an imagined threat to morality is by no means an archaic notion. Perhaps the illumination of the manipulative nature of people keeps this show connected to all generations.

Then again, why overanalyze? With one of musical theater's most toe-tapping scores and memorable cast of characters, "The Music Man" is just good, old-fashioned (but not too old-fashioned) fun.

The Music Man

What: Summer Lyric Theatre at Tulane concludes its 43rd season with Meredith Willson's "The Music Man." Diane Lala directs Christopher Carey as Harold Hill, the lovable con man who tries to swindle cash from the residents of River City, Iowa, by starting a boy's marching band. To successfully con the town, he must find away around librarian and piano teacher Marion Paroo.

When: Friday-Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 2 p.m.

Where: Dixon Hall, Tulane University

Tickets: \$26 to \$35. Tickets can be purchased by calling 504.865.5269.

Parking: Near Dixon Hall, the Tulane garage on Ben Weiner Drive and the Loyola garage on Freret Street. Due to road construction on the Tulane campus, theater-goers should allow extra time to park.

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