

## **'Light Up the Sky' shines**

**Quad-City Times - February 21, 2008 - by David Burke**

There's nothing quite like the hours before the opening night of a theater production. It's a mixture of sincerities and insincerities, nervousness and niceness that hangs thick in the air. All of those involved at the birth of this new creation want to be the proud parents.

But then the baby's born. And the baby's ugly.

That's the scenario presented in Moss Hart's "Light Up the Sky," which ran for six months on Broadway in 1948-49 and is currently revived by the Richmond Hill Players in Geneseo, Ill.

The nostalgic piece is a smart, old-fashioned comedy, nicely played by the ensemble of 10. It all takes place in actress Irene Livingston's (Molly McLaughlin) suite at the Ritz in Boston, before and after the out-of-town premiere of the Broadway-bound "The Time is Now," which its producer (Dave Bailey) promises to be a "Roman candle in the tired face of show business."

Knocks on the door bring in a parade of theater types, including a prone-to-tears director (Dave Rash), a veteran playwright (Don Hazen), the star's mother (Jan Golz) and the star's husband (Greg Golz, playing his real-life wife's son-in-law), the producer's reluctant-to-invest wife (Susan Philhower) and a truck driver-turned-neophyte playwright (Eric Noyd).

Everyone is showered with affection and repeated toasts — until the audience sees the show and declares it a stinker.

Cue the blame game.

All those involved point the finger at each other in the depiction of a play that somehow involves the end of the world taking place at Radio City Music Hall. Add to the mix a Freemason (Renaud Haymon), in the hotel for a convention, who may be able to salvage this mess after all.

Having opened on Feb. 14, it's appropriately a Valentine to theater life. Cast members get their best quips in, with several strong performances from a show that receives the esprit de corps it demands.

Hart — best known for co-writing "You Can't Take It With You" — lands squarely on behind-the-scenes theater convention and uses both Hazen's Owen Turner character and Noyd's playwright Peter Sloan as the outsiders looking in, giving the audience perspective to what they might not understand.

Richmond Hill didn't change a word in the — probably for the late '40s anyway — sometimes-salty dialogue and smartly provides a glossary page in the program to acclimate the audience with long-ago theater personalities and terms.

Special kudos to co-director (along with her stepdaughter, Michaela Giebel Moore) Eugenia Giebel, who stepped in at the 11th hour in place of Mary (Meme) McCarter, who unfortunately suffered a stroke hours before the show opened. Giebel is smooth as the ghostwriter of McLaughlin's diva character's autobiography.

## **Flop Flipped**

**River Cities Reader – February 20, 2008 – by Mike Schulz**

Truth be told, I'm rather envious of the audiences who'll be seeing Light Up the Sky during its second weekend at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, because while I had a mostly terrific time at Friday night's production, I'm guessing that subsequent crowds will have an even better one.

As a whole, the only things really missing from playwright Moss Hart's catty theatre comedy were speed and assurance, and while these weren't exactly insignificant issues, they weren't debilitating ones, either; under the direction of Eugenia Giebel and Michaela Giebel Moore, the actors were clearly having fun with Hart's enjoyably bitchy dialogue, and that fun was infectious. It shouldn't take much effort, though, to turn this good show into a really good show. The performers just need to be less hesitant about selling their

characterizations (and quicker with their cue pickups), and for a hint on how to accomplish this, I offer the cast one directive: Watch Susan Philhower.

Hart's 1948 comedy concerns the out-of-town tryout of a new Broadway drama that, based on the opening-night laughter, looks to be an embarrassing bust, and among the hyper-tense assemblage reacting to the crisis - a group that includes the play's director (Dave Rash), author (Eric Noyd), and leading lady (Molly McLaughlin) - Philhower portrays the production's wealthy co-producer, Frances Black. Her role isn't larger than anyone's in *Light Up the Sky*, yet the actress handily strolls off with Richmond Hill's latest, and does so through the simplest of means: She enters as a fully formed, brazenly unapologetic stereotype and earns laughs - many laughs - merely by staying in character.

Employing the lightly exaggerated Noo Yawk cadences of *Guys & Dolls'* Adelaide, and delivering her dialogue with disarming matter-of-factness, Philhower creates a wholly appealing, sensibly money-hungry comic figure, and Frances' routines on the play's presumed awfulness and the indulgent spending of her co-financier husband (David Bailey) are witheringly, hilariously sarcastic. Yet watch Philhower when she's not speaking. Alert to the action and conversations around her, she emits continuous trickles of comedically resigned impatience; the actress connects with her role so well that she doesn't have to do much more than behave to be supremely engaging.

If several others don't quite match her, it's only because they seem slightly timid about outlining their characters with the necessary broad strokes, and perhaps a bit unsure about their lines. (On Friday, there weren't a lot of awkward conversational pauses - just enough of them to be noticeable.) When the other actors are feeling secure, though, it's easy to tell; the jokes, and the characters' personalities, tend to pop like firecrackers.

Jan Golz, as McLaughlin's level-headed mother, oftentimes pops the loudest, and not just because of the actress' glorious, fathoms-deep speaking voice, which seems tailor-made for deadpan comedy. Golz's unforced naturalism can knock a gag out of the park, and the timing on her punchlines is superb; the actress waits just the tiniest of beats before unleashing a baritone zinger. (She's also an occasional wordless riot here, as in the smartly directed sequence in which her character considers throttling some off-stage drunkards.) Renaud Haymon, as a happily overwhelmed Mason, makes strong acting look as effortlessly relaxed as breathing; the audience was audibly disappointed when he was unceremoniously scooted off-stage. And Dave Rash, currently celebrating his 40th anniversary with Richmond Hill, plays the over-emotional director with a veteran's panache.

There's an odd element to Rash's performance, though, and to those of Dave Bailey and Greg Golz, as well. *Light Up the Sky's* program features a summary of the show's plot - including its finale, which is also odd - in which Rash's character is described as a "swishy, lugubrious director." Yet while Rash's director is lugubrious, he's anything but swishy; Bailey's and Golz's characters are, though, and there are times when their fey mannerisms and prissy retorts don't mesh with the roles. (Bailey plays a gruff megalomaniac and Golz portrays the starlet's ineffectual husband.) I enjoyed the actors' willingness to play against expectation - Bailey delivered some particularly hysterical readings - but it was often difficult to determine whether we should laugh with or at them, as both Bailey and Golz appeared a tad leery about going over the top as much as they needed to.

Of course, it's entirely possible that the performers were somewhat thrown off their game by the illness of cast member Mary McCarter, whose role on Friday was played (and, under the circumstances, well-played) by co-director Giebel. Yet if I could've asked for more from the production, it would've been, quite simply, for even more, including more dripping egomania from Molly McLaughlin's diva, more self-directed anguish from Eric Noyd's novice author, and more jadedness from Don Hazen (whose smooth vocal rhythms add warmth to every role he's cast in) as a cynical playwriting pro. By *Light Up the Sky's* climax, the show-within-a-show looks to be in excellent shape; I'm thinking that continued familiarity with the piece and continued, deserved appreciation from Richmond Hill audiences will lead to the same happy ending for *Light Up the Sky* itself.

## **Richmond Hill's `Light' is a little dim**

**Dispatch-Argus – February 20, 2008 – by Jeff Dick**

Putting on a play that isn't all too familiar to local audiences should score bonus points at the outset, and for that, the Richmond Hill Players' production of "Light Up the Sky" starts with a tally in the plus column.

But there probably are good reasons that playwright Moss Hart's love letter to the theater hasn't been attempted by other Quad-Cities-area theater groups.

First of all, the play itself is a mixed bag -- a piece written in 1948 that hasn't exactly aged well. This isn't a timeless classic by the likes of Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams; it's a middling, nostalgic comedy about the ups and downs of producing a successful play, penned from an insider's perspective best appreciated by dedicated theater devotees.

Secondly, judging by this production, the play is not that easy to pull off -- especially by community-theater actors. Seasoned professionals might stand a better chance of "selling" sardonic dialogue that depends on a knowing attitude and deadpan delivery.

The story takes place just before the opening of a new play in a Boston tryout before a planned move to Broadway. One by one, the show's producer, his wife, the playwright, the director and several others involved with the production gather in the leading lady's hotel suite with a sense of optimism.

The upbeat mood proves short-lived, however, at a post-performance gathering of the same characters. Accusations fly over the perceived flop they have on their hands -- until a surprising turn of fortune.

During last Saturday's show -- the third in its eight-performance run -- some actors seemed to be giving a reading of the play rather than dramatizing their roles; others took an entertaining bite out of theirs.

In the latter category, Susan Philhower, with her slinky gown, war-paint makeup, blonde wig, grand gestures and haughty demeanor, offered some surefire comic relief as the ditsy but ultimately sly producer's wife. After attending the premiere of the allegorical play-within-the-play, she summed up the group's reaction by innocently asking, "What the hell was that play about?"

David Rash, as the show's director, fared pretty well, too, with a recurring laugh line ("I could cry") and adroitness as a raconteur.

Presumably, in the last weekend of the play's run, those actors less at ease in their roles will find their footing. Some were starting to show signs of getting their sea legs by the second act on Saturday night.

Judging by the regular laughs from the crowd, though, those shortcomings didn't appear to detract from the audience's enjoyment. For most of them, this "Light" seemed to shine just fine.

## **Moss Hart's LIGHT UP THE SKY is a comedy-drama that is all about the theater.**

**Ruby Nancy.com – by Ruby Nancy**

The first act is set prior to a show's opening night, and the second act takes place immediately after. The characters are all people associated with the show in some way, and anyone who has ever worked on a show is likely to recognize at least a few of them: an overly-theatrical leading performer and an eccentric director being only two of many who make an appearance here.

In fact, Hart has crammed the show with distinct personalities, which provide the basis for most of the comedy and conflict in LIGHT UP THE SKY.

Molly McLaughlin plays Irene Livingston, the melodramatic star, and Dave Rash is Carleton Fitzgerald, the superstitious director who is overcome with emotion about every five seconds.

There is also a first-time producer determined to make a profit (David Bailey, as Sidney Black), the mother of the star (Jan Golz, as Stella Livingston), and a starstruck out-of-towner (Renaud Haymon); plus a motley assortment of others who crowd in and out of the Livingston's hotel suite on the night in question.

While all performers are not on the same level, and some segments of the show lack pacing of any sort, there are several very nice performances and a handful of bright spots that make this production of LIGHT UP THE SKY enjoyable just the same.

McLaughlin is on-target with her overdone Irene, sometimes employing lightning-quick changes in "emotion" that are completely (and appropriately) laughable. Her bit about costuming changes for Irene is a total hoot, and the way she sweeps around her suite is perfectly imperious. Rash is more low-key as Fitzgerald (and not the least bit swishy, though the printed synopsis says his character is), but his line readings of "I think I'm going to cry" just get funnier every time he delivers this repeated lament.

Bailey combines a folksy manner with a major swish in the role of Sidney, and what he lacks in authoritative presence he makes up for in nervous energy, which still seems to work. Haymon is wonderfully invigorating, bringing an enthusiastic presence into the dour post-show gathering. Another lively performer is Susan Philhower, who plays Sidney's wife Frances. Her Frances is a highly entertaining character – a former champion skater who married into big bucks but never lost her country mannerisms – and Philhower gives the role an irrepressible energy that is endlessly appealing.

Best of all in this show is Golz, whose performance as Stella is a laugh-aloud treat. Golz shines in this over-the-top comedic role, spitting out one-liners and slamming her fists onto her hips with amazing – and hilarious – regularity. From her tale of sneaking into a closed dress rehearsal and her way with gin rummy to her frequent spats with her son-in-law (Golz' real-life husband, Greg Golz), Stella is, in Golz' capable hands, the character to watch.

Yes, there are slow sections in this LIGHT UP THE SKY, which probably add ten or 15 minutes to the show's running time, but director Eugenia Giebel (who had to fill in a small role for an actor who was ill opening weekend) still has plenty to brag about.

Overall, this is a show that entertains, and theater folks will especially be amused by some of the characters and situations here. There were no Roman candles going off while I was there, but I still enjoyed seeing this play.

## **Woman reunites with the stage after 10-year hiatus**

### **Dispatch-Argus – February, 21, 2008 – by Claudia Loucks**

GENESEO -- Susan Philhower is finding her "inner blonde" in her part in the Richmond Hill Players production of "Light Up the Sky." The Moss Hart comedy will be staged through Sunday.

Even though the troupe is not new to Mrs. Philhower, she estimated it has been about 10 years since she's been onstage due to her work schedule.

"I'm at that awkward age -- somewhere between ingenue and matriarch -- so there aren't too many opportunities," she said.

She said she went to the Richmond Hill Players auditions "to fill out the audition groups," and she was astonished to be cast.

What amazes Mrs. Philhower are the many new faces involved with the Geneseo-based theater group.

"Most of the cast from "Light Up the Sky" are new friends, but two who deserve recognition are Eugenia Giebel and Michaela Moore (play directors)," she said. "Both these women were just dipping their toes into the group before and now they are directors."

It is evident Mrs. Philhower is enjoying her reunion with the theater group, and it also brought back memories of her early years with fellow performers and the productions in which she was cast with them.

She and her husband Bill Philhower moved to Geneseo when the late Clyde Walter, one of the Richmond Hill Players founders, was active with the group.

"He was a delight and sparked much of the development of the group," Mrs. Philhower said. "My first walk-on role was wheeling (Dr.) Dave Rash on stage in 'I Never Sang for My Father.' I remember Muff

LoGiudice, who starred in 'On Golden Pond,' as one of the most generous leading ladies, and Kevin DeDecker did a lot of hand-holding when the butterflies started swarming. Mike McBride, in 'Play It Again Sam' astonished me during backstage chatter as a widely read eclectic performer and his colleague Sharon Luikart was always a risk-taker as a director. Stan Weimer, in 'The Nerd,' gave clueless a whole new meaning.

"The most tactful award goes to John VanDeWoestyne (president of the Richmond Hill Players), who found a way for this non-singer to hoof her way through the 'The 1940's Radio Hour.' Joe DePauw, of 'Play On', wins distinction for his infectious laugh and unflappable style. Jalayne Riewerts' organization and attention to detail as a director and performer are inspiring."

Born in the Chicago area and raised near Wrigley Field, Mrs. Philhower took dance classes as a child, but added, "that was my only experience in front of the footlights before. I'm pretty sure there were several years where in my heart I wanted to be a ballerina, however, it always did seem the best advice was to get a day job."

Mrs. Philhower said she and her husband, a Tiskilwa native, are happy to have chosen Geneseo as their hometown after college.

"It was the perfect place for a city mouse-country mouse marriage to prosper," she said. "Small-town life insists that you get up to your armpits in community activities."

Even though she has retired from a career in education, Mrs. Philhower admits she is "always enrolled in some class, taking an online course or practicing new skills."

She volunteers as the ComPuter Tutor at the Geneseo Public Library, teaching adult learners about technology tools. She recently completed training as senior health-insurance program (SHIP) volunteer with where she serves as a board member. She also is a former alderman on the Geneseo City Council.

She ran her first half-marathon in September of 2007 and added, "I am pleased to announce that I finished on the same day."