

Blue Hill's 'Forum' fulfills longing for summertime laughs

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Summer, especially summer in Maine, is for laughter.

In offering up "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," the New Surry Theatre not only recognizes but also honors this notion in its production that opened Friday and runs weekends through Aug. 16.

The company's production at the Blue Hill Town Hall Theater of the 1962 musical that earned Stephen Sondheim the first of many Tony Awards is a delicious way to spend a summer evening. The local talent serves up a show that's a step above the usual community theater fare thanks to the tight direction of Bill Raiten and marvelous mugging of lead actor Michael Reichgott.

"Forum" is loosely based on three comedies by the Roman playwright Plautus and tells the story of the Herculean efforts by the slave Pseudolus to earn his freedom from Hero, his young master. The only things standing in his way are courtesans, soldiers, long-lost children, a virgin and a fellow slave.

Reichgott, who is a newcomer to Maine and the theater company, seems to channel Zero Mostel and Nathan Lane, who played the role on Broadway in 1962 and 1996, respectively. He hams it up colossally, always stepping up to but never crossing that thin line that divides hysterically funny from grossly crass.

The actor is equally adept at the physical comedy, the double-entendres and belting the role requires. Reichgott wrings every drop of humor from the part and throwing himself into his character's big numbers — "Comedy Tonight," "Free" and "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid."

He is nearly matched by Christopher Candage as Hero and Jim Fisher as Hysterium, his fellow slave. Both are in sync with Reichgott's comic timing and tuned in to the rhythm that is essential for a farce like "Forum" to succeed.

Candage, a recent graduate of Plymouth State University in Plymouth, N.H., looks like a linebacker and sings like Harry Connack Jr.'s younger brother. He captures the sweetness of a young man in love without becoming sanguine. Fisher's hysterical solo, "I'm Calm," is frantic without turning frenetic, and his tall, willowy frame is a great visual contrast to Reichgott's rounder physique.

The leading women, Marjorie Freimuth as ingenue Philia and Laurie Schreiber as Hero's mother, Domina, have less experience onstage than their male counterparts and it shows. Neither seems to be entirely comfortable in her role and their voices aren't quite up to Sondheim's score. Their performances, however, undoubtedly will improve with subsequent shows.

It's not often that a young performer in a small part with few lines stands out but 13-year-old Nolan Ellsworth is the exception. As one of three proteans, who double as slaves and soldiers, Ellsworth has a stage presence far beyond his years and an energy that makes it nearly impossible not to be mesmerized by every step he takes on stage.

Elena Bourakovsky's garish costumes and Dan Snyder's subdued set pieces complement each other nicely and work well on the small stage at town hall. Under the direction of musical

director Sheldon Bisberg, the three-piece orchestra sounds much larger than it is, and Maureen Robinson's choreography allows the performers to showcase their abilities without overtaxing them.

A "Forum" full of laughter is the perfect way to end a sublime summer's day.

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