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No, No, Nanette

Downey Civic Light Opera at the Downey Theatre

Reviewed by Les Spindle

October 07, 2010

In 1971, Burt Shevelove adapted and directed a hit Broadway revival of this melodic 1925 tuner, revisiting the nonsensical yet exuberant conventions of early musical comedy, while subtly updating the piece with a tongue-in-cheek tone. Director Marsha Moode's resurrection of the Shevelove version—now close to a relic, as well—plays the material more straight than satirical. What's wrong with offering unapologetically escapist entertainment in an era filled with despair and unrest? The approach is fine and the results are generally effective, greatly energized by choreographer Janet Renslow's ebullient production numbers and **Hector Salazar's rousing music direction and conducting.**

Otto Harbach and Frank Mandel's libretto is a series of inconsequential plot threads barely holding songs and dance segments together. Demure ingénue Nanette (Andrea Dodson) and her fiancé, Tom (the appealing Derek Rubiano, substituting for Peter Schueller), face obstacles to their romance. Meanwhile, Jimmy Smith (William T. Lewis), the wealthy uncle who is raising Nanette, is conniving to hide his three extramarital flings from his wife, Sue (the amusing Julie Simpson). Everyone ends up in Atlantic City, where madcap mix-ups ensue. The Harbach–Irving Caesar–Vincent Youmans score is among the sprightliest ever to grace a vintage musical confection. Highlighted by the infectious "I Want to Be Happy" and the classic love duet "Tea for Two," the songs remain blissfully enjoyable, and Renslow and her talented troupe of gypsies make the most of them.

At an opening weekend performance, the pace between musical numbers wasn't always as crisp as one would hope. A few performers appeared to have not yet hit their ideal stride. That certainly wasn't the case with the charming and funny Lewis, whose way with a soft-shoe proves as dazzling as his droll dexterity with one-liners. John Racca, as Jimmy's loyal attorney, Billy—caught up in his client's ruse—is likewise superb, particularly in the smashing "You Can Dance With Any Girl at All," which Racca shares with Charlotte Carpenter (terrific as Billy's sophisticated wife). Dodson exudes warmth and good humor in the title role, and her singing voice is splendid. In the choicest comedic part, Susan Dohan is priceless as the feisty, wisecracking housemaid, an apparent forerunner to Shirley Booth's unforgettable "Hazel."

Presented by Downey Civic Light Opera at the Downey Theatre, 8435 E. Firestone Blvd., Downey. Oct. 1–17. Fri.–Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2:30 p.m. (562) 923-1714. www.downeyciviclighthouse.org.

No, No, Nanette

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“Tea For Two” and “I Want To Be Happy,” two of the biggest hits of the 1920s, made their Broadway debut eighty-five years ago in *No, No, Nanette*, a show that won a grand total of four big Tony Awards—not in its original Broadway engagement but forty-six years later in a revival that ran almost three times longer than the original.

For this reason alone, *No, No, Nanette* is worthy of attention, even in 2010, and 21st Century theatergoers now have the chance to discover this little bit of Broadway nostalgia at the Downey Civic Light Opera.

As might be expected in a pre-*Oklahoma!* musical, there's not a particularly weighty or consequential plot. A trio of couples meet by chance in an Atlantic City cottage as a blackmail scheme and oodles of ensuing misunderstandings unfold around them—and that's about it. On the other hand, since the 1971 Broadway return engagement starred 1930s movie hooper Ruby Keeler and won a Best Choreography Tony, it's no wonder that tap-dancing production numbers abound.

William T. Lewis plays millionaire Bible publisher Jimmy Smith, husband to pennypinching Sue Smith (Julie Simpson) and guardian to their ward Nanette (Andrea Dodson), a sheltered teen who's grown sick and tired of always being told “No, no!”—even by her straight-laced boyfriend Tom (Peter Schueller). Poor Jimmy has gotten himself into a bit of a pickle by agreeing to become “benefactor” to a trio of comely gold-diggers—Betty from Boston (Cecily Gish), Winnie from Washington (Scarlett Brais), and Flora from Frisco (Nicole Manly), aka “The Big One.” When the three hussies decide to turn to blackmail to up their “earnings,” Jimmy's lawyer Billy Early (John Racca) agrees to help a friend in need. Somehow or other, all of the above characters, plus Billy's wife Lucille

(Charlotte Carpenter), grumpy maid Pauline (Susan Dohan), and twenty of Nanette's closest, dearest friends, end up at the Smiths' Atlantic City home-away-from-home, better known as Chickadee College. Farcical complications ensue.

No, No, Nanette's original book by Otto Harbach and Frank Mandel was considerably revised by Burt Shevelove of *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum* fame for the show's 1971 revival, one-liners, gags, and snappy comebacks added in abundance. Songs (music by Vincent Youmans, lyrics by Otto Harbach and Frank Mandel) have almost nothing to do with the plot, but have a nostalgic tunefulness about them.

In less capable hands than those onstage and off at the Downey Theatre, No, No, Nanette could have ended up too silly and dated to hit the mark. Thankfully, director Marsha Moode has cast and staged the production with savvy and panache, and choreographer Janet Renslow has the able cast of Equity pros, college students, and musical theater aficionados doing some of the snappiest tapping this side of 42nd Street.

Lewis delights as bookish Jimmy, Racca proves himself accomplished song-and-dance man as Billy, and Simpson sparkles as Sue. Downey CLO treasure Carpenter gets to show off her terrific pipes (and legs) in "Too Many Rings Around Rosie" and her smokier side in the "Where Has My Hubby Gone Blues." Dohan steals every scene she's in as the ever-gripping Pauline, a role written originally for one-of-a-kind Patsy Kelly, whom Dohan channels affectionately all the while making the role her own. The charming pair of Schueller and Dodson get the lion's share of love songs, which they solo and duet to perfection. Gish, Brais, and dance captain Manly are cute and funny as the three blackmailing chippies.

No, No, Nanette being a 1920s musical, its more than half a dozen production numbers are about as context-free as its songs, the show's twenty or so singers and dancers suddenly appearing out of nowhere to back up whoever is singing at the moment. As improbable as this is (at one point all the men come on stage strumming *ukuleles!*), who's complaining? Renslow gets high marks for the production's perky, tap-packed choreography, which the eager ensemble execute nimbly, their varying degrees of dance training scarcely perceptible. Dance standouts are assistant choreographer Nathan Wise and Anne Arreguin, Raul Avina, Christopher Curry, Carlos Ferrusca, Ashley D. Gallo, Meaghan Gates, Adam Huynh, and Melissa Martinez.

Completing the energetic ensemble are Paul Anderson, William Crisp (Max), William Gorin, Greg Hardash (Sam), Courtney King (Iris), Danny Marin, Aleesha McNeff, Shelby Monson, Natalie Neimann, Derek Rubiano, Lauren Santos, Victoria Spero, Kyle VanAmburg, and Frances Wolke (Rose).

Musical director Hector Salazar does a fine job conducting the big Downey Civic Light Opera orchestra. Mark W. Keller's simple but panoramic set design, Elizabeth Bowen's colorful period costumes, Kim Killingsworth's lighting design, and Jay Lee's sound design all get thumbs up. Gary Richardson is technical director and Sally Casey Bell is stage manager.

No, No, Nanette joins previous Downey CLO revivals of Good News and 42nd Street as a nostalgic look back to a simpler, gentler era on the Broadway stage. No weightier than a feather, No, No, Nanette takes its audience of all ages on an entertaining journey back in time.

Downey Theatre, 8435 E. Firestone Blvd. , Downey. Through October 17. Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00. Sundays at 2:30. Reservations: 562 923-1714. www.downeyciviclightopera.org

--Steven Stanley October 1, 2010