

Theater Review: Join the band with Reagle's 'Music Man'



Scott Wahle (left) as Harold Hill and Mark Linehan as Marcellus Washburn sing "The Sadder-but-Wiser Girl."

**By David Brooks Andrews/DAILY NEWS
CORRESPONDENT
GHS**

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WALTHAM —

How can anybody resist Meredith Willson's "The Music Man," any more than River City, Iowa, was able to resist the charming Harold Hill and his marching-band scam?

Well, if you have as much as half a heart or half a need, you really can't resist "The Music Man." It's simply too playful, witty and heart-warming, even

some 50 years after it first opened on Broadway. Although it's set in rural America in July 1912, it has a wonderful timelessness to its spirit and message.

It's especially hard to resist "The Music Man" if a production of it is well done. And the Reagle Music Theatre of Greater Boston's production is not just well done, it's superbly done with all of the life and vigor that will sweep you off your feet and put your troubles behind you for an evening or afternoon.

In many ways, this show is a reprise of Reagle's production of it six summers ago. Once again Scott Wahle stars as Harold Hill and Sarah Pfisterer as Marian Paroo, the town's librarian, although this time the show is directed by Bob Freschi rather than Reagle's artistic director Robert Eagle.

You may wonder if you are ready to return to the same show with the same stars only six years later. But the moment the curtain rises on the heads of the traveling salesmen bobbing as they talk-sing the patter of "Rock Island" -- almost an earlier version of rap -- all in the rhythm of a moving railroad car, you'll know that you are ready. You'll want to get right onboard that car and get off it with Harold Hill when he finally

emerges from behind his straw hat, reveals who he is to the salesmen who have been excoriating him, and steps off into River City.

As for the same stars, you'll realize just as quickly that you wouldn't want anybody else in those roles. Wahle clearly is made for Harold Hill. It's as if Wilson had written the role for him or as if Wahle had spent his entire life preparing for the role. It's in his soul, and it's a joy to watch it effortlessly pour forth from him.

Harold loves people, loves loosening them up, infusing them with fresh spirit. OK, maybe not for all the right reasons. But over the course of the show, his love of people eventually prevails over his selfish motivations. He's playful, mischievous, and full of energy and joy. And all of this clearly taps into who Wahle is.

It's a pleasure to watch him light up the town's hopes as he leads them in "Seventy-Six Trombones," see him turn the squabbling school board into a lovely Barbershop Quartet, and watch him pursue Marian without realizing how deeply he has fallen in love with her. Wahle has a warm, easy stage presence and a rich, inclusive speaking and singing voice. All those years as morning anchor on WBZ-TV obviously have had a musical theater payoff.

Sarah Pfisterer is just as perfect for the role of Marian Paroo. Early in the show, she conveys an appropriately prim, cool, but elegant sense of a woman who may never find a husband because her standards are so high. It's a very funny scene when Hill first approaches her with the three oldest pick-up lines in history: "Is this your handkerchief?," "Haven't I met you before?," and "I'll only be in town a short time." Pfisterer responds with delightful crispness, "No," No, and "Good."

But the show draws on Pfisterer's great warmth and tenderness as Marian begins to see the positive effects that Harold is having on her 10-year-old brother Winthrop, whose shyness is caused largely by a lisp. It's a touching moment when Marian is about to hand over a book to Mayor Shinn that proves Harold is a con man, but at the last moment she tears out the incriminating page.

Pfisterer plays it beautifully, just as she does the scene when Harold sets Marian's library into a whirl of dancers spinning and leaping off tables. One of the show's great strengths and sources of electricity is the original choreography of the Broadway show and film recreated by choreographer Susan Chebookjian and energetically and crisply performed by Reagle's talented dancers. Pfisterer begins methodically stamping books at the front desk, but is soon dancing with Wahle, letting us know that her wall of reserve is quickly letting down. She has a lovely grace and an exquisite, operatically trained, singing voice. You need a Marian whom you can believe will finally break through Harold's rascalion fear of settling down. And Pfisterer is just the actress to do it.

Considerable comedy is provided by Harold "Jerry" Walker" as the crotchety old-time Mayor Shinn and by Mary Callanan as Eulalie McKecknie Shinn who leads hilariously corny dance productions.

Mark Linehan, a Natick native and a Somerville High School teacher, brings a lot of physical humor to the role of Marcellus Washburn, Hill's sidekick in crime, magnified by his considerable height advantage over Wahle.

Twelve-year-old Andrew Purdy is delightful as Winthrop Paroo, finally belting out "Gary, Indiana," after all his shy shuffling. And Ellen Peterson brings great warmth and charm to Mrs. Paroo, as she encourages both Winthrop and Marian to launch out into life.

Elegant costumes, with the townspeople dressed in shades of oranges, salmons and browns and the women with high-feathered hats, nicely accent the show as do painted backdrops that feel like they come out of the period.

This is a show about people casting off aspects of themselves that have been holding them back and embracing something bigger. To see Reagle's production will make you feel like you, too, can drop what's holding you back and begin to fly.

THE ESSENTIALS:

"The Music Man" by Meredith Willson

Through July 25

Reagle Music Theatre, 617 Lexington St., Waltham

COST: \$35 to \$57, \$10 for children accompanied by an adult

INFO: 781-891-5600, www.reagleplayers.com

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