

# THEATER REVIEW: The Music Man

Love story is main attraction in 'Music Man'

THEATER REVIEW: "The Music Man" at the Paramount Theatre

★★★★½

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(HANDOUT)

Notwithstanding the considerable charms of librarians — named Marian and otherwise — it's the kid who holds the emotional keys to "The Music Man," the masterful Meredith Willson musical from 1957 about a traveling con-man who, for the first time in a long career of band-themed flimflammy, finally gets his foot caught in an Iowa door.



Winthrop, a taciturn young fellow still mourning the loss of his real pop, immediately recognizes the con-man, Professor Harold Hill, as a potential father-figure and, just as quickly, the needy kid realizes the man is suffused with stuff and nonsense. Ergo, Harold Hill has a life-changing crisis into which even an "over-the-hill" 26-year-old librarian can leap. In essence, this great American show is about a music man who finally comes to realize he cannot be a father to anyone because he has been no kind of man at all. His crisis isn't far removed from that of Billy Bigelow in "Carousel."

You'd be surprised how many productions of "The Music Man" miss this truth — shows that unleash those "Seventy Six Trombones" without forging any particular connection between Harold Hill and Marian Paroo, let alone Harold Hill and Winthrop Paroo (he's Marian's brother). But not Rachel Rockwell's production at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora. This latest stellar offering at the historic venue about an hour's drive from the Loop offers a variety of pleasures, including a pit that might not contain 76 pieces of brass but does contain more than enough musicians to render the rarely heard overture to this piece in all its glory. But the main accomplishment of this show, designed by Kevin Depinet with an apt frame motif, is the way it brings truth and high emotional stakes to this very familiar story, so often shrouded in caricature.

Rockwell has some help from Winthrop, who is played by 12-year-old Johnny Rabe. Rabe, a whopping, quirky talent, is not the usual spunky community kid you find in these suburban musicals but, in fact, just got done playing the lead in a Broadway show — he beat out a few kids to get Ralphie in "A Christmas Story." The two characters aren't far apart, actually. Young Rabe catches that.

And then there is Rockwell's interesting decision to cast Stef Tovar as Harold Hill. Tovar, an actor who sings with a passable tenor rather than a legit vocalist, wasn't an obvious choice. He's done mostly gritty dramatic work in his career. And you can see that leading "Ya Got Trouble" in a 1,800-seat musical palace is outside his normal comfort zone, if only by his sweat. But Rockwell and Tovar make it work because the casting decision creates such an acute contrast between Tovar's awkward, out-of-town interloper — imagine a Steppenwolf ensemble member working for the Disney Cruise Line — and the townspeople he's trying to con. Unlike many directors, Rockwell takes an unsentimental view of the town, evoking "American Gothic" stubbornness and moralistic pomposity and having a great deal of fun therewith (Liz Pazik is especially poignant as Eulalie Mackecknie Shinn). Tovar, meanwhile, is far more cynical and removed than most Harolds, who tend to get caught up in the big production numbers and their own salesmanship. Tovar's Harold clearly hates himself, until there is a sudden reason to change.



There certainly are no vocal limitations when it comes to Emily Rohm's Marian. Rohm sings the role beautifully and she invests with great fullness in the conclusionary climax. There is also a clearly sexual connection between the two leads. I don't mean to imply this is anything other than a family-friendly musical — of course not — but the connection is crucial, because that jolt of raw desire (I mean, she is 26) is what makes Marian suspend all her usual rules. You can see this most clearly in Rockwell's take on the famous River City Library scene, when "Marion the Librarian" becomes very much about a sensual awakening and, yet more notably, about all the risks that Marian fears she's taking with Harold.

Like most productions of "The Music Man," this one also comes with more archetypal performances, and it's in a few of these more conventional moments that this starts to feel like every other "Music Man." The ideas Rockwell touches on could be taken further. But the routine elements are kept in check, and, especially in Act 2, the distinctive signposts rise to the fore, especially in the sequences with the kids of River City, the unusually potent scenes with Michael Aaron Lindner's Marcellus, and also in the closely charted relationship of the show's juveniles, choreographed by Rockwell herself.

This is a production that fully reveals the brilliance of the material: Willson was a very skilled satirist not unlike Harold Hill when it came to giving his 1950s audience one thing while it thought it was buying another. Rockwell's Aurora production, by far the best local "Music Man" in years, clearly understands this is a show that must function on many levels. You have to probe the soul of small-town America (and although he was writing about 1912, Willson also was deconstructing the 1950s) while making sure you also deliver the brass band. That's signed and sealed in Aurora.

*Through Feb. 3 at Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora; running time: 2 hours, 40 minutes; tickets: \$34.90-\$46.90 at 630-896-6666 or **paramountaurora.com***

