

Review:

'The Producers' at the Paramount: 'Springtime for Hitler'? Do they dare? Oh, they do



The cast of the musical comedy "The Producers" at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora.



Chris Jones, Chicago Tribune

Mel Brooks was ecstatic. Anne Bancroft danced on a nearby table. Matthew Broderick chuckled. Even Nathan Lane cracked a smile. “The Producers” was a hit.

In fact, the spin-off musical from the deliciously archaic movie was the greatest pre-Broadway tryout in Chicago history. For anyone who was inside the Cadillac Palace Theatre that night in 2001, the problem of the night was preventing the bursting of one’s sides.

But this is a review of the Paramount Theatre of Aurora’s new production of “The Producers,” as directed by Jim Corti. As I sat there on Sunday, I kept thinking to myself, they’d never get away with that joke now, followed by, they’d never dare do that joke now, followed by ... you get the idea. As the Paramount stage filled with swastikas, (spinning swastikas, swastikas on shanks, swastikas on sticks), I found myself looking around for protesters who did not understand the chief creator’s unwavering creed that hate must be combated at all times with ridicule. I didn’t see any, although a few people already had left in a hurry. Perchance they cared not for Ulla Inga Hansen Benson Yansen Tallen Hallen Svaden Swanson Bloom and her preferences for elevenses.

“The Producers,” let us stipulate, was of its time. A time that does not feel that long ago to me, but change, friends, comes quickly.

I’ve seen enough regional productions of this show by now to see some of the pitfalls. Max Bialystock, the conniving producer, has to be just roguish enough to remain likable. Just because Broderick wasn’t a great singer doesn’t mean the accountant Leo Bloom doesn’t have to sing well if you don’t have Broderick (believe me, he does). And the show resists directors who heed not the advice of the prophet Mel when he stateth, “don’t be stupid, be a smarty.” I would worry about printing the rest of that line, a caution that Brooks, of course, would find absurd.

The biggest pitfall of all, though, is the urge to copy. Over time, the material has become synonymous with the original staging — such as, for example, the famous Susan Stroman dance numbers featuring a chorus of Little Old Ladies using their walkers to tap. But that’s not kosher, really. Although, as they sing in “Avenue Q,” it’s a fine, fine line.

What I liked best about Corti’s production can be summed up in two sentences. His show is fearless, often doubling down where others would demur. And it is brimming with original ideas.

To wit: Corti and his ensemble stages Little Old Ladyland in what looks like a Palm Beach senior hotel, replete with pool boys. Instead of walkers, you get the fake seniors partaking of an in-and-out-of-the-water, Busby Berkeley-style extravaganza. It’s spectacularly zesty in all the right ways. Similarly fresh is the “Springtime for Hitler” sequence, which Corti stages like a twisted tableau from “Beauty and the Beast.”

Most newer productions of this show have been simplifications. That does not apply here. It’s a massive staging — a full orchestra with the original orchestrations to the Brooks and Thomas Meehan ditties, a set design from William Boles that crams half of Times Square on to the Paramount stage and all manner of spectacle.

All of the leads are engaging—the standout is Jake Morrissy, a huge local storefront talent who has been waiting for this kind of challenge and director. He sings (and dances) far better than any Leo I’ve seen before and his comic timing is top-notch. He plays opposite the experienced Broadway actor Blake Hammond as Max, whose work I also enjoyed, even if he takes a while to rev up to full comedic speed.

Ron E. Rains dives deep into Franz Liebkind, the West Village Nazi whose lousy play the producers hope to destroy, bilking all their wrinkly investors.

Elyse Collier gives Ulla the self-aware wink she needs. Adam Fane flies away as Carmen Ghia, as he should.

And no moment in the show is funnier than the sight of Sean Blake, who plays Roger DeBries, standing there grinning sheepishly in full-on Hitler gear. You'll just have to be there.

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

cjones5@chicagotribune.com

Review: "The Producers" (3.5 stars)

When: Through March 17

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

Running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes

Tickets: \$36-\$69 at 630-896-6666 or www.paramountaurora.com