

Kentwood Players Continue to Light Up the Sky

By Conrad Hurr

"...there shines through this play, at its best moments, a kind of singing poetry, a lyric quality of exultation and hope, that make it a stirring and exciting experience"— *Elinor Hughes, The Herald.*

This play "sticks a roman candle into the tired face of show business, and the sparks that fly light up the theater like an old-fashioned Fourth of July"— *Sidney Black.*

Go to the Westchester Playhouse and see Moss Hart's "Light Up the Sky," playing now through October 15. The late Hart was the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "You Can't Take it With You" in 1936, Academy Award-winning screenwriter of "Gentleman's Agreement" in 1947 (a personal favorite), and Tony Award-winning director of "My Fair Lady" in 1957. "Light Up the Sky" is an allegory of hope: an insider's backstage comedy about the ups and downs of Opening Night. This is a subject Hart should know after writing, directing, or producing forty plays.

Waiting for the Kentwood Players' production to start, we are taken back to 1948 with Michael Keith Allen's vintage set design of bright brass doorknobs and



Ben Lupejkis and Maria Pavone during the show.

antiquarian furniture. The spot-lit Eleanor Duse painting on the wall is a gold-framed allegory of all the achievement that successful theatre has to offer. Susan Stangl's Big Band-era sound design gets us in the mood with Glenn Miller's 1942 "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree," and Irving Berlin's 1946 "There's No Business Like Show Business," among others. This is the era that many of the well-heeled octogenarians in the audience may actually remember; when fur coats were not attacked with spray paint, and effeminate male artistes had to have wives. It would actually work to pick up a phone and click the disconnect button to get the operator, and then say "get me the manager of the airport." And we thought the internet was fast!

We're in a star's hotel suite of Boston's Ritz-Carlton Hotel in "Magic Time:" the three hours before "The Time is Now" opens for the first time across the street, and the play still belongs to the artists that created it. It's by a new playwright, and takes place in the ruins of the Radio City Music Hall after a bomb has gone off. As each of the theatrical power brokers (elegantly costumed by Sheridan Cole) from the theatre enter the suite for a celebratory drink, they allegorically represent the anxiety that comes to any creative artist just before releasing a creative work to John Q. Public.

"Light Up the Sky" is an excellent choice for a theatre if you want to give a lot of actors a hot seat in the limelight. With so many bigger than life characters, each actor can really chew the scenery as they bite each other's back. Each steals the scene from the actor before, and director Kathleen Chapin has the actors take their star turns in center stage to deliver their elocution.

The new playwright, Jerad Callen as Peter Sloan, is overwhelmed by his new-found success of being produced. "This is all velvet," he declares, and with wide-eyed idealism he claims he just "wrote from the heart." This character is an allegory for the maturation of Moss Hart, as he metamorphoses from naive to battle-hardened. Set Designer



Pictured from left to right: Phil Apoian, Maria Pavone, Jerad Callen, Ben Lupejkis, Goellrey Jons, Michael Allen, and Gail Bernardi.

Allen also plays the flamboyant director Carleton Fitzgerald (no relation to Ritz-Carlton), who obsessively avoids jinxing his play with superstitious secrecy. With pony-tail, beret, and waxed mustachios, the moody director has his humble moments as well. He claims he "just plucked the strings at the harp," but the actors get the credit for following the tune. Then there's Ben Lupejkis as the fast-talking producer Sidney Black, the true star of "Light Up the Sky" that really makes this play worth the admission price. I've never heard so many words with oi sounds since I foisted woked in a pig farm. Sidney invests in "\$300,000.00 worth of potential sheep dip," to open the show, but he, too, is humble. He claims that he "just paid for the ink on the Declaration of Independence," while others wrote and signed it.

Maria Pavone as Irene Livingstone plays the egocentric star with great energy and melodrama. Gail Bernardi as star mom Stella Livingstone, wrings every drop of sarcasm from Hart's dialogue. "Don't take it lying down, standing up is better: you can see where the stuff is coming from." She reveals how she paid a cleaning woman for admittance

to the top-secret final dress rehearsal, then borrowed her mop and put a rag on her head to remain unnoticed. This becomes one of the funniest bits of the play as she gives a scathing pre-review of the secret show, and then wordlessly reacts to Carleton turn his glimpse of her in the balcony into a schmaltzy anecdote. Phil Apoian is professional playwright Owen Turner, with a gift for writing "touching and deep" theatre for the past twenty two years; he's the veteran training the newbie Sloan. Geoffrey Jons is Irene's husband Tyler Rayburn, convincing as a dull Harvard Man always in the wrong place at the wrong time.

No one can predict whether a new show will be a hit or a flop; it depends largely on its opening night. How will the audience and critics respond? This critic saw Light Up the Sky on its opening night, and pronounces: hit.

LIGHT UP THE SKY, 8301 Hindry Avenue, (310) 645-5156, 9/9/05-10/15/05, 8 p.m., \$15, or \$13 students/seniors.

Conrad Hurr is getting a Master's in Theatre from Cal State L.A., and has appeared in 35 plays. He currently teaches acting for the Recreation and Parks Department.