

The Fantasticks Opens at Westchester Playhouse

By Conrad Hurtt

"The style is entrancing"—New York Times
"It has a freshness, youthful charm, and a touch of imagination"—New York Post
"The most inventive music in town!"—Cue Magazine
"A Magical Musickal"—Saturday Review

These were the reviews for the New York production; now it's your chance to see the Westchester Playhouse production of *The Fantasticks*, and judge for yourself. This is the 1960 musical by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt that was the winner of an Obie, a Tony, and four Guinness Book of World Records: the world's longest running show still in its original theater (17,162 performances in almost 42 years at the Sullivan Street Playhouse in Greenwich Village), the world's longest running musical, the longest running show in American theater history and most performances by an actor (6,348 by the producer Lore Noto as Hucklebee).

The story is based on Tom Jones' (no, not the Vegas Tom Jones) 1956 *Joy Comes to Deadhorse*, inspired by George Fleming's 1900 *The Fantasticks*, translated from Edmond Rostand's 1894 *Les Romanesques*, which is a rip-off of William Shakespeare's 1597 *Romeo and Juliet* with a twist: the parents invent a feud in order to make their children fall in love.

Joy Comes to Deadhorse was a musical set in the Wild West, with a chorus of cowboys in adjoining but feuding ranches: one Spanish and the other Anglo (perhaps the inspiration for the Jets and Sharks from *West Side Story*?) This play premiered at the University of New

Mexico, featuring a father Don Luis with his daughter Luisa, and her nurse (just like Juliet). A bandit Strafoel had two sidekicks: a half-breed Apache, modeled on Tybalt, and an old medicine show ham named Henry Fenwick.

The *Fantasticks* has all of these characters except the helpful Nurse, who has been replaced by the helpful Wall: a Commedia-style theatrical device in which the stagehand is not concealed, and becomes both a character and a set piece (played with a great sense of fun by Andrew Zimmer). Greg Abbott plays Hucklebee (The Boy's Father) with bug-eyed hilarity, and Ben Lupekis plays Bellomy (The Girl's Father) with vaudevilian comic timing.

With a deep and resonating singing voice Jon Sparks has the Strafoel role: rewritten as The Narrator El Gallo (named after "The Rooster" Jose Gomez, the famous gypsy bullfighter in Spain). In the tradition of the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, he starts and stops the action, moving the actors to and fro at will. Looking like Zorro, he has quite a sales job as he attempts to convince The Girl's Father to allow him to abduct his daughter one of twenty one different ways (by coach, horseback, canoe, Indians, day, moonlight, etc.) in his song, "It Depends on What You Pay."

The stand-out performance of the evening is Bevan Michael Haynes as Matt (The Boy). He has a beautiful singing voice, and never breaks character (even when he accidentally tripped and fell off the stage); it is rare to see an actor so seamlessly inhabit his character. Holly Sedillos is Luisa (The Girl), and has the most technically professional

voice in the cast. Max Hledring Stormes as the ham Henry and Robert G. Davis as the Indian Mortimer work well off each other.

El Gallo comes out at the opening and sings the song you've probably heard before: "Try to Remember." This song tells us to forget the way the world is, and imagine a time in the past when things were more innocent. At the end of the play, the Boy and Girl then give up their youthful illusions and move into a season of maturity.

This cyclical nature of the play is reflected in the lyrics: much of the play takes place in the gardens of the feuding parents, and the songs use images of vegetation, seasons, gardening, fruition, and harvest as a metaphor for the growth of the boy and girl. The story unfurls, with the lovers finally evolving into maturity.

This production, directed by Kirk Larson, is scheduled for eighteen performances by the Kentwood Players. The cast of eight performs eighteen songs, and all the actors have vibrant voices under the musical direction of Elizabeth A. Bouton. They dance and stunt fight with flair, choreographed Marie Madera. Tony Pereslete's set design gives us



Pictured from left to right: Ben Lupekis as "Bellomy," Holly Sedillos as "Luisa," Bevan Michael Haynes as "Matt," and Greg Abbott as "Hucklebee."

the carnival atmosphere. The accompanists Stephen Hulseley and Dean Mora play the live piano music that gives this show its vitality.

THE FANTASTICKS, 8301 Hindry Avenue, (310) 645-5156, 5/5/06-6/17/06, 8 p.m., \$18.00, or \$16.00 students/seniors/military.

Conrad Hurtt has received a Bachelor's in Theatre from U.C. Berkeley, performed in 35 plays, and almost finished a Master's in Theatre from Cal State L.A.

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