

Metropolis delivers all the comedy tonight in its splendid production of 'A Funny Thing...'

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By Erin Fleming

Metropolis' third show of its 2018-2019 Main Stage season, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, delivers on the promise of its properly prophetic opening number "Comedy, Tonight!" Director **Lauren Rawitz** has created a raucous Roman romp with a little "something for everybawdy."

Widely and rightfully regarded as one of the funniest musicals to ever pratfall onto the Broadway stage, *Forum* boasts music and impossibly clever lyrics by **Stephen Sondheim** with a book to match, penned by the team of **Burt Shevelove** (*The Frogs* and *No No, Nanette*) and **Larry Gelbart** (*Tootsie* and *M*A*S*H*). Based upon the plays of **Plautus**, the plot revolves around Ancient Roman slave Pseudolus as he schemes to win his freedom by helping his young master Hero win the beautiful courtesan Philia, who is, of course, promised to a vainglorious soldier. Along the way we're introduced to Hero's lecherous father Senex and overbearing mother Domina, slave-in-chief Hysterium and an ensemble featuring several courtesans of the house of Marcus Lycus. It's a musical farce, full of stock characters, slapstick, sight gags, wordplay, improbable twists of mistaken identity, cross-purpose dialogue, chases, close calls and lots of door-slamming. (A full synopsis and production history of the 1963 Tony-winner for Best Musical may be read [here](#).)

All of that needs to run like a hilariously well-oiled and demented machine, and does here, thanks to the collaboration of Rawitz's expert pacing, **Kailey Rockwell**'s spot-on musical direction and **Bryan J. Wlas** choreography, which alternates between vaudevillian soft shoe and a little bump-

and-grind. It seems like these three have just wound up the cast and let them go, scurrying and scampering around the colorful set like cartoon characters.

And what a cast of “lovers, liars and clowns.” **Erik Dohner** (Miles Gloriosus), **Teddy Gales** (Lycus) and **Bob Sanders** (Erronius) bring the best of buffoonery to their roles. **Melissa Crabtree** uses her incredible and athletic voice to great comic effect as Domina throughout, but especially when holding an impossibly long note at the beginning of “That Dirty Old Man.” **Crabtree’s** performance highlights what is perhaps the biggest flaw of the play: it could use more Domina.



Any production of *Forum* is only as strong as its Pseudolus, who is simultaneously the linchpin of all the intricate plot machinations and the calm eye in the center of the storm. **Tommy Bullington** succeeds in propelling the action ever forward and confiding in the audience so they’re in on the joke, all with inexhaustible energy. Actors in this role are often cast for their charm, comic timing or stamina alone, any of which is a tall enough order; **Bullington’s** singing in “Free” is equally wonderful.

No surprise then that the rest of the players have comedic chops to match their vocal talent. Young Lovers Hero (**Adam Ross Brody**) and Philia (**Maddy Kelly**) have the chemistry of an old vaudeville husband and wife team (think Burns & Allen, but with both of them as dingy as Allen) and sound gorgeous on “Love, I Hear,” “Lovely” and “Pretty Little Picture.”

Among all these talented players, **William Marquez** is a standout as the aptly named, high-strung and beleaguered Hysterium, his brilliant timing and acrobatic antics evoking Tony Hale on *Veep*. He shines in “I’m Calm” and “Everybody Ought to Have A Maid,” and is frequently the funniest thing on stage on watch.



Kudos to the creative team for creating an ensemble with an eye to diversity and non-traditional casting. The Courtesans (stunningly dressed by **Aliceson Hackett-Rubel**) are especially enhanced by the humor, talent and little something extra brought to the party by **Joe Farrell** (Tintinabula) and **Parker Guidry** (Gymnasia).

The many stories about the complicated production history of mounting *Forum* in 1962 describe the show as an attempt to return laughs and low comedy to what had become an innocuous and sterile Broadway stage. Listen, it succeeded. A show this unapologetically politically incorrect might be a risky choice for audiences in heavily hash-tagged, uber-woke 2019. After all, it's a period piece twice over, if you count both the unenlightened Ancient Roman era it's set in and the not-so-evolved-from-that early 1960s America when it debuted. Most of the jokes rely on a lighthearted acceptance of unsavory attitudes toward women, old-school sexual politics and slavery, which, though arguably historically accurate, can be a big ask. The great news here is that **Rawitz** truly triumphs over this pitfall by empowering her cast to treat the material fearlessly and playfully, steering the wheel into the ridiculous, over-the-top spin of it all. The audience happily jumps on for this fast-paced, irreverent ride.

Metropolis presents "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" through June 29 111 W Campbell Street, Arlington Heights. More information and tickets are available [here](#).

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