

Metropolis excavates laughs from 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum'



Pseudolus (Tommy Bullington), left, shares bad news with Miles Gloriosus (Erik Dohner), second from right, and his soldiers (Nick Arceo, Natalie Renee Savoy and Eric Deutz) in the musical "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" at the Metropolis Performing Arts Centre. (Courtesy of Ellen Prather/Metropolis Performing Arts Centre)



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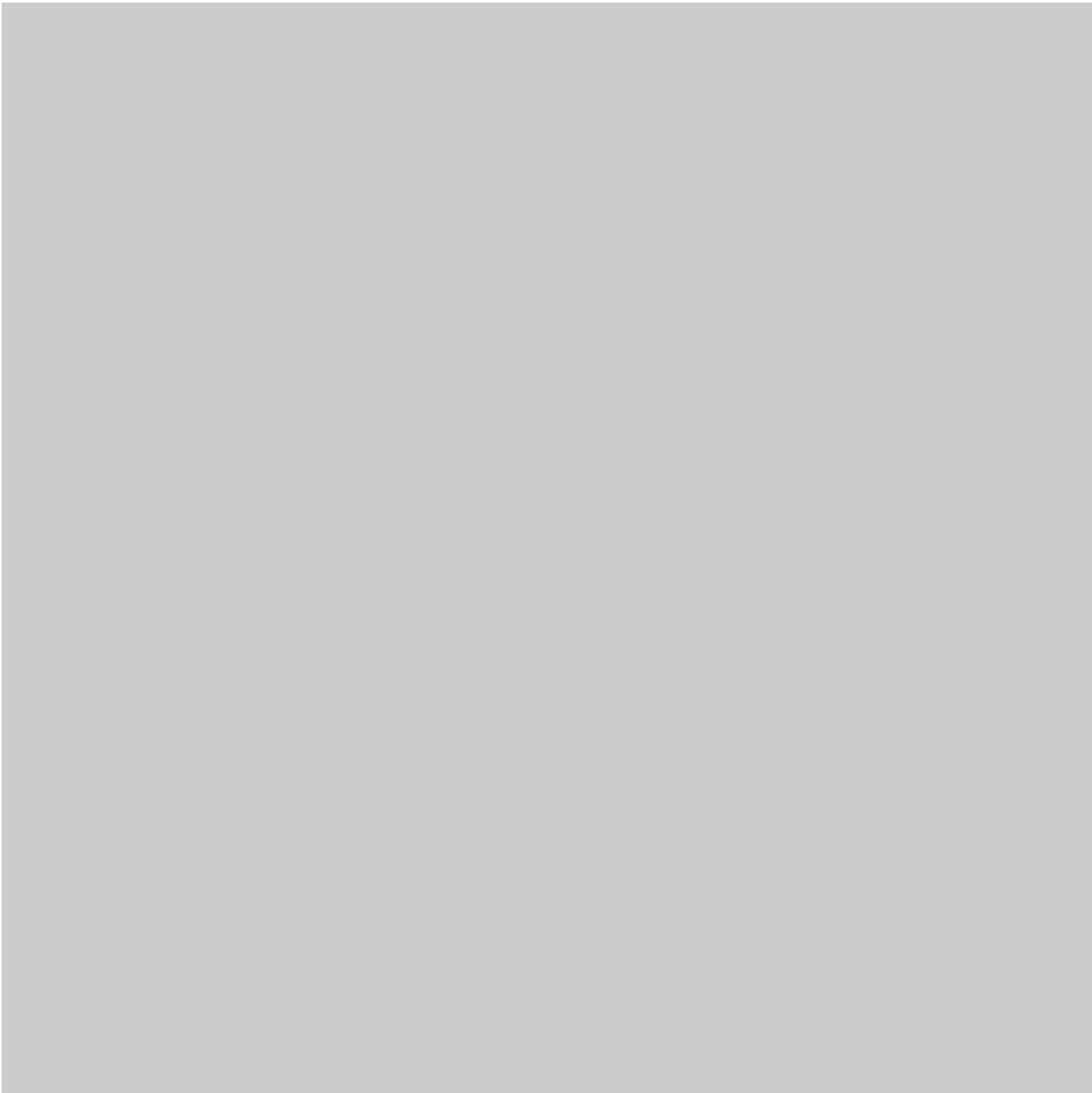
"A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" -- ★ ★ 1/2

Farces are arguably the toughest shows to get right. Daffy dialogue and slapstick situations can fail to land if vocal inflections or physical timing are even slightly off.

This becomes clear with Metropolis Performing Arts Centre's production of "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," which strikes the right chords vocally but misses a few comic beats.

This 1962 Tony Award-winning musical has an impressive pedigree: an ingenious early score by Stephen Sondheim ("Sweeney Todd," "Into the Woods"), plus a zany burlesque-style script by Larry Gelbart ("M*A*S*H," "Tootsie") and Burt Shevelove ("No, No Nannette") inspired by the ancient Roman comedies of Plautus.

"Forum" focuses on the wily slave Pseudolus (Tommy Bullington, who physically and aurally brings to mind a bearded Lou Costello). Pseudolus is promised his freedom if he can help his master, the awkward youth Hero (a sweet and reedy Adam Ross Brody), to win over the affections of ditsy neighbor Philia (a naturally earnest Maddy Kelly, who boasts a gorgeous voice).




Senex (Austin Nelson Jr.), left, Pseudolus (Tommy Bullington), Hysterium (William Marquez) and Marcus Lycus (Teddy Gales) sing "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid" in the musical "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" at the Metropolis Performing Arts Centre in Arlington Heights. - Courtesy of Ellen Prather/Metropolis Performing Arts Centre

But Philia is the property of the flesh merchant Marcus Lycus (a smug Teddy Gales), and she has been purchased by the self-absorbed military captain Miles Gloriosus (Erik Dohner, a strong singer with a burly baritone). Adding to the complications are Hero's bickering parents, the

randy Senex (a laid-back Austin Nelson Jr.) and suspicious Domina (a booming Melissa Crabtree).

High-strung slave Hysterium (William Marquez) gets pulled into Pseudolus' ever-evolving schemes, while a trio of changeable "Proteans" (Nick Arceo, Eric Deutz and Natalie Renee Savoy) adds to the entanglements. There's also the elderly traveler Erronius (Bob Sanders), who makes a late and problem-solving arrival.

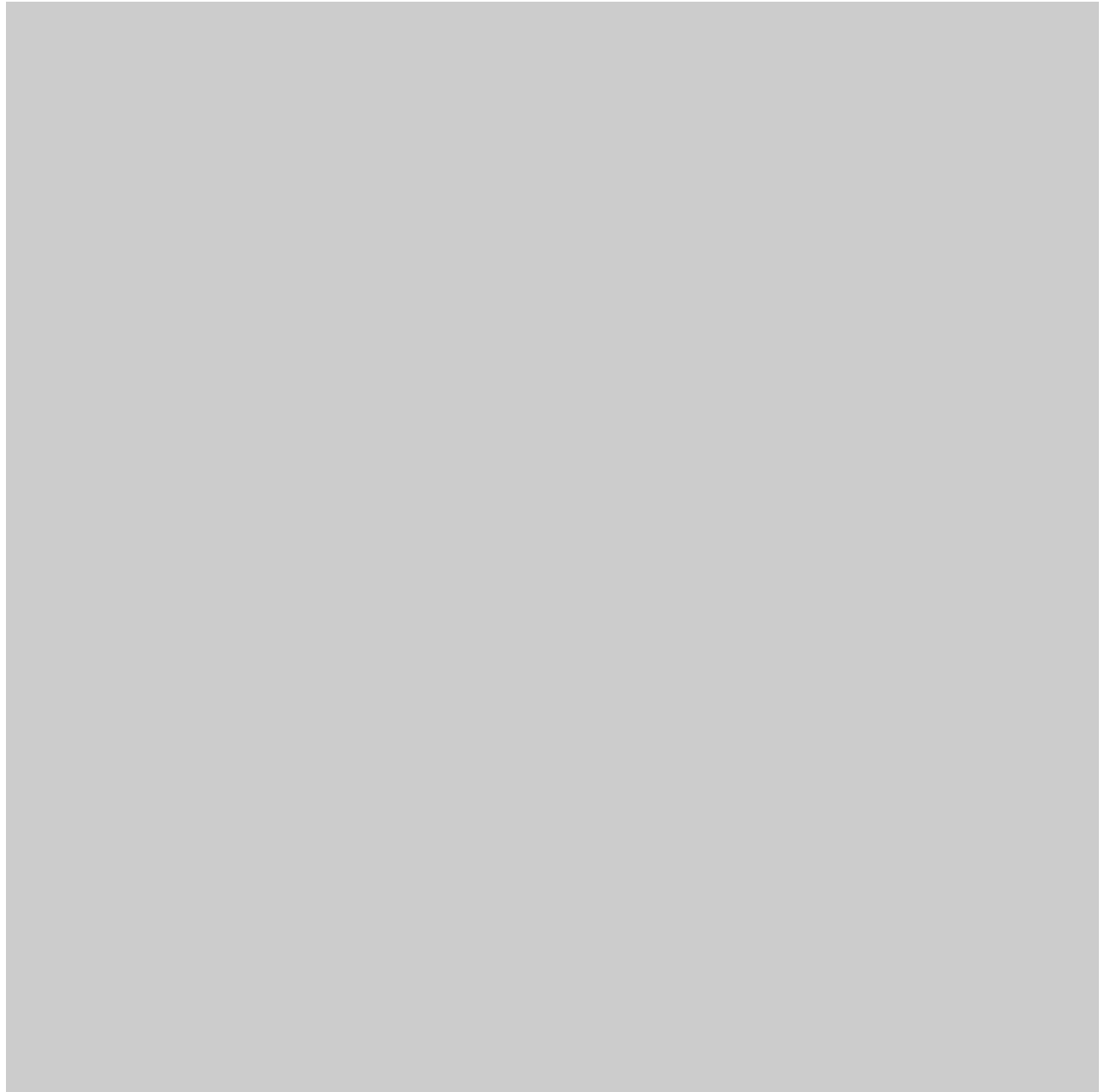
Some of the showgirl-ogling humor and battle-ax spouse jokes in "Forum" haven't aged well. But director Lauren Rawitz has deployed some admirable inclusive casting in the supporting roles.



Hysterium (William Marquez), center, tries to separate the young lovers Philia (Maddy Kelly) and Hero (Adam Ross Brody) in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" at the Metropolis Performing Arts Centre in Arlington Heights. - Courtesy of Ellen Prather/Metropolis Performing Arts Centre

For instance, Marcus Lycus doesn't discriminate for his "house of ill repute." There are two drag acts with Joe Farrell and Parker Guidry as the respective courtesans Tintinabula and Gymnasia. They're just part of the ranks with Madelyne Forrester as Panacea, Alaina Wiz as Vibrata and Sarah Beth Lipsman and Sophie Vitello as the twin Geminae.

The courtesans handle the bulk of Bryan J. Wlas' limber choreography, and the whole cast -- led by music director Kailey Rockwell -- is vocally accomplished. "Forum" also features handsome production elements with Aliceson Hackett-Rubel's colorful costumes and the three-house unit set of designers Robert and Jonathan Pinta.



Senex (Austin Nelson Jr.) and Domina (Melissa Crabtree) bicker in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" at the Metropolis Performing Arts Centre in Arlington Heights. - Courtesy of Ellen Prather/Metropolis Performing Arts Centre

Comically, however, this "Forum" comes off as more fine than first-rate. There's a missing spontaneity from many of the actors, whose reactions at times feel forced rather than genuine. Additional urgency would also energize the chases and near-miss entrance and exits that threaten to foil Pseudolus' plans.

The funny built-in framework of "Forum" unquestionably prompts plenty of laughs, but Metropolis' production would have been stronger had it mined more.

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Location: Metropolis Performing Arts Centre, 111 W. Campbell St., Arlington Heights, (847) 577-2121 or metropolisarts.com (<http://metropolisarts.com>)

Showtimes: 7:30 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 3 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday (no matinee June 29); 3 p.m. Sunday; through June 29

Tickets: \$40

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes with intermission

Parking: Adjacent parking garage and area street parking

Rating: Features bawdy sexual humor and drag

