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Summer opens with a garden 'Swing' in Annapolis

May 30, 2013 | By Mary Johnson, The Baltimore Sun

Despite last weekend's cool weather, summer arrived for many at the opening of Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre's 47th season of theater under the stars. Fine performances and a full moon added magic to the opening of "Swing!"

Conceived by Paul Kelly to debut on Broadway in December 1999, "Swing!" became [groundbreaking](#) entertainment, offering pure song and dance — no plot or dialogue to tie the classic numbers together.

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From left, Aubrey Baden, Jenna Bouma, David Merrill, Katie... (Photo by Bud Johnson for...)

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Kelly's concept remains fresh at Summer Garden, where audiences hear fine jazz standards played by the troupe's big band, interpreted by a [skilled](#) cast of dancers and singers.

Summer Garden's "Swing" is directed and choreographed by Patricia Golden with musical direction by Julie Ann Hawk, who was seen onstage last season in the troupe's production of "Anything Goes" and now proves she is [comfortable](#) on both sides of the footlights.

"Swing" is given an Art Deco black-and-white set befitting 1930s RKO Hollywood musicals, with white stairs topped with black to resemble piano keys rising from the stage to a second level where singers perform above dancers.

Set design is by director-choreographer Golden and technical director Matt Mitchell, who actually serves triple duty, having worked with Dan Snyder, Dan Caughran and Scott McCormick to upgrade the troupe's sound system. The distortion-free, feedback-free system is a great [improvement](#), enabling Annapolis Summer Garden to jive into its "Swing!" opener.

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Big Band

Another plus is the costume design of Meghan O'Beirne, whose creations include costumes that move well for the dancers, and glamorous 1930s-inspired gowns for lead singers Katie Gardner and Janae Barber. Seldom have this troupe's male leads and singing ensembles appeared more dapper than here.

Music is central to this show, and the stellar band is led by pianist-conductor Ken Kimble and features Zach Konick on drums, Kevin Hawk on guitar, Karl Alexander on reeds, with Gary Wolfe and Randy Martell alternating on trumpet, Nick Hogg and Mike Bravin alternating on trombone, and Meagan Frame and Matt Henry alternating on bass.

Together at center stage, the musicians form a big band that could have earned a nod from Benny Goodman if he had heard their rendition of "Stompin' at the Savoy," and Duke Ellington if he had heard "Caravan" echoing across the Annapolis dockside.

As for the singing: Bravo to this ensemble's work, with a special nod to Annapolis Summer Garden regular Aubrey Baden for delivering a nifty "I Got a Gal in Kalamazoo" in his 10th show with the troupe.

Lead male singer Kelston Thomas delivers a dynamite "It Don't Mean a Thing if It Ain't Got that Swing," and follows with solid renditions of upbeat tunes. Thomas fulfills the bright promise he showed in August 2010 when, as a recent Severna Park High School graduate, he impressed with his portrayal of Richie Valens delivering a lively "La Bamba," complete with gyrations.

David Merrill makes an astonishing Summer Garden debut; his classically trained voice is a standout. He proves adept at upbeat tunes, "Show Me What You've Got" and "Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy," while lending romantic warmth to an "All of Me" duet with lead singer Katie Gardner.

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For her part, Gardner delivers a swinging "Bounce Me Brother" and shows stunning versatility with the moving "I'll be Seeing You" and a show-stopping "Blues in the Night." Adding her own glamour to a series of fabulous costumes, Gardner looks and sounds like a leading lady from Hollywood's golden era.

Lead singer Janae Barber adeptly handled several upbeat tunes, encountered some slight pitch problems in Hoagy Carmichael's "Skylark" — then delivered a fantastic version of "Cry Me a River" in a dynamic duet with trombone. This is her first performance in a musical, but I predict she'll soon sail through her every number.

This show is more about dancing than singing, and Summer Garden has a strong troupe to execute Golden's complex choreography. In fact, such challenging choreography forces dancers to concentrate so intently that their overall excellence was sometimes diminished.

Dancers Amanda Cimaglia and Hannah Thornhill not only surmount every challenge, but appear to relish conquering all while communicating the joy of dance. Together, they truly display the essence of swing.

Cimaglia shows brightest in her Latin moves, and Thornhill displays virtuosity and humor when paired with Wendell Holland in "Dancers in Love." Holland discovers how exhausting "Dancing with the Stars" must be!

"Swing!" continues Thursday through Sunday at Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre, 143 Compromise St., Annapolis, through June 15. Order tickets online at summergarden.com or call Box Office at 410-268-9212.

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